

# **A Prayer for Revival:**

*Dr. Maarten Kuivenhoven*

Scripture Reading: Habakkuk 3

Text: Habakkuk 3:1–2

What is your greatest need right now in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic? How would you classify your needs? How would you classify the church's greatest need in the midst of God's finger of judgment? How would you classify the nation's greatest need? What is this world's greatest need?

- Is it a halt to the virus?
- Is it healing for those infected?
- Is it help for those on the front lines?
- Is it wisdom for our leaders?
- Is it a return to economic prosperity, work, and stability?
- Is it a return to what we used to call “normal” life?
- These are pressing needs of the hour that impact our daily lives.

But the greatest need according to Scripture that we have is the need for spiritual awakening. Our greatest need is for revival, to learn the spiritual lessons that God would have us to learn in order to humble ourselves under the hand of God. But what is awakening or revival? It is “a supernatural, divine influence [of the Holy Spirit],

which restores the joy of God’s salvation to apathetic Christians; awakens the spiritually dead in the church to their spiritual and moral condition; and leads many people from outside the church to the [biblical] Christian faith.”<sup>1</sup> This definition is not my own, but is gleaned from Dr. Schlachter’s book, *The Next Great Awakening*. It is a helpful little book that details the way that God works in awakening.

Why is revival and awakening the greatest need of the hour? Because God says so. His Word is full of warnings calling His people to return to Him and seek Him afresh, because God is speaking. God speaks in providence. He speaks in judgments. He speaks in COVID-19, calling humanity to turn to Him. As the idols of our hearts, which have caused spiritual amnesia, are being stripped from us one by one, there is one thing that comes to the fore—we need to turn to the LORD in repentance, in faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Our greatest need is not to read the media reports, to see the numbers, and to see how the virus is progressing across the face of this world. We need to stop our pontificating and revising opinions. We need to put our hands over our mouths and confess that God is just and righteous and that God is just and true in all His judgments. We need to listen to what God is saying and we need to pray for spiritual awakening, so that the entire church will not waste this epidemic. What an indictment it will be if decades from now historians analyze the church’s response and they see only spiritual lethargy, a church that is slow to respond spiritually, and a church that remained sleepy and lethargic under the hand of God in the COVID-19 epidemic.

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1. Terry Schlachter, *The Next Great Awakening* (Grand Rapids, MI: Ephesians 3:20 Publishing, 2014), Loc. 101–107, Kindle Edition.

This message gets us to reckon with God's judgment and what He is calling the church to do in the midst of such judgment. The prayer and life of Habakkuk provide a profound lesson for us in this matter—to pray in the midst of God's judgments upon us for revival and awakening, for that supernatural divine influence to come and take hold of us so that we would know that God is real, that our sin is real and an offence to God, and that we have done our part in this judgment as well. We pray for revival, the restoration of the joy of God's salvation to our souls. We pray for awakening of souls in our church and all around the world and to lead others into the church and to the glorious gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our theme is "A Prayer for Revival." There are four essential elements to such prayer:

- 1) The recognition of God's sovereignty;
- 2) The revival of God's people;
- 3) The revelation of God's work;
- 4) The remembrance of God's mercy.

### **The Recognition of God's Sovereignty**

Habakkuk was given a message for Judah. It was not a comforting message. It was a message of God's judgment. God was going to use the Babylonians, the Chaldeans, to chastise Judah and bring them into exile. Why was God going to do that? Listen to Habakkuk's plea in 1:2-4, "O LORD, how long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear! Even cry out unto thee of violence, and thou wilt not save! Why dost thou shew me iniquity, and cause me to behold grievance? For spoiling and violence are before me: and there are that raise up strife and contention. Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth." Habakkuk's plea shows that the cultural situation is dire—spoiling, violence, lawlessness,

injustice. The application of the law is craziness; that is the interpretation there. Habakkuk in a sense is reasoning with God, challenging God: “How long shall I cry, and thou wilt not hear?” He does not understand what God is doing in raising up the Babylonians to discipline Judah and even challenges God at points in this short book in his journey to recognize God’s sovereignty over the entire situation and the judgment that was going to come. How canst Thou send this heathen nation to discipline Thy people?

We need to understand that God will not spare Babylon either. God’s woes pronounced upon Babylon in chapter 2 likewise show a culture and nation ripe for judgment. None of the nations of the world are excepted from God’s judgments. Let me summarize those woes—Woe to the nation that exploits other nations for its own gain! Woe to the nation that exploits others for personal security! Woe to the nation that builds its empire through cruelty and violence! Woe to the nation that induces other nations to immorality! Woe to the nation that replaces God with lifeless, mute, and dumb idols that cannot help in the midst of calamities and trials! God’s accountability of the Chaldeans would have provided some comfort to Habakkuk and the faithful remnant.

The point is this—Judah’s situation and Babylon’s situation mirrors our own, doesn’t it? Habakkuk’s situation sounds a contemporary note. It reads like a modern-day news story. An analysis of our culture and the nations of the world demonstrate a culture ripe for judgment where the law and its application have become crooked and crazy. Where injustice and immorality abound on a personal level, a national level, and even an ecclesiastical level, we can say that we are ripe for judgment. No one wants to hear that message, but that is the reality we are facing in this world. That is what God is calling us to reckon with in His Word. Maybe we are perplexed by what

is happening. We look at COVID-19 and wonder what is going on. Maybe we cry out and challenge God, “How long will this go on and we cry to Thee and Thou wilt not hear? How can God do this? How can we acknowledge that God is sovereign over this virus as it spreads across the nation and to our own community? Why would God do this?”

How does Habakkuk come to recognize God’s sovereignty in the midst of judgment? How can we do the same?

First, through *submissive faith*. The words of our text show that Habakkuk is living by faith in the midst of judgment. This prayer in chapter 3 is a song of faith extolling God in the midst of God’s judgments. It is an exposition of Habakkuk 2:4, “The just shall live by his faith.” It is faith in the living and sovereign God that puts our lives in perspective in the midst of God’s judgments upon our church and nation. It is faith that submits to what God is doing in our lives. It is faith that reaches up to God and calls for Him to exalt Himself in the midst of judgment. It is faith that submits to God and enables us to say, “Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The LORD God is my strength” (3:17–19). That is where faith brings us in the midst of trial, in the midst of challenge, even in the midst of God’s judgments and chastisements. Submissive faith clings to God alone in the midst of calamities. It says that God is righteous, and just, and holy. It is faith that sees through the judgment to see the sovereign hand of God to humble us as individuals, as a church, and as a nation. Without the lens of submissive faith, we will always challenge God in what He is doing. Submissive faith submits to God’s sovereignty and says, “God has this under control.”

Second, we move to recognize God's sovereignty through *submissive silence*. Habakkuk further recognizes God's sovereignty through submissive silence. This is seen in Habakkuk 2:20 where the prophet says, as he sees the impending judgments coming upon Judah and Babylon, "But the LORD is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence." This is an expression of submission to the sovereignty and holiness of God. Habakkuk stops with his "Why?" questions. His faith takes the helm of his life and he moves to silence before the awful majesty and the judgments of God because faith sees that what God does is good and right. Are you there? Submissively silent before the holy throne of God? How often have we clicked on the headlines to see what's going on? How often have we been quick to share our opinion or someone else's opinion of what's happening? We think to ourselves that this will be over in a few short weeks. No, this is going to take six or nine months. It doesn't matter how long or short it will take. What matters is that we are silent before the holiness and the justice of God. That's where we need to be. We need to turn off the media channels, the social media, the blogs, and Twitter, and we need to sit in silence and contemplate who God is. He is holy. He is righteous. He is glorious. He is sovereign. He is on the throne. He is on the throne, and we are not! We are sinful. Let's think about that, too. Let's consider how we have contributed to this trial, personally in our own lives and as a church. Let's reflect on that and see how we have contributed to God's judgments. Then we will be silent, and know that we cannot dictate to God what He must do. Let us humble ourselves in the dust. Let us put our hands over our mouths and let God be God. Without silence before a sovereign God, we will never learn the lessons that He has for us in COVID-19. We learn to recognize the sovereignty of

God when we learn to be silent before Him, and acknowledge that He is on the throne of our lives.

Third, we come to recognize God's sovereignty through *submissive fear*. Finally, Habakkuk recognizes God's sovereignty through submissive fear. In Habakkuk 3:2 he says, "O LORD, I have heard thy speech, and was afraid." In the midst of his silence before a holy God, Habakkuk hears the voice of God speaking. Faith listens and hears the voice of God, not just through His Word, but also through His providence and judgment, and we hear what God is doing. Habakkuk hears the sound of judgment and he recognizes that God's justice is perfect and righteous, a reflection of who He is. He cannot tolerate sin in His people and so He will come in purifying judgment to discipline His people. Habakkuk says earlier that God is of purer eyes than to behold evil. God cannot see evil and do nothing about it. God cannot see sin in His people, and leave it there. He will come to purify us. There is a movement from silencing our own voices, to hearing God's speech, and then to a submissive fear before God. It is a fear that trembles at the holiness of God, and at the judgments of God. Read verse 16: "When I heard, my belly trembled; my lips quivered at the voice: rottenness entered into my bones, and I trembled in myself, that I might rest in the day of trouble." There is a physical element to this fear, not of undoing us, but in trembling in our rightful place before God. Are we listening for the voice of God to give us the proper perspective in the midst of this crisis? As long as we maintain our own voice, we will not hear the voice of God speaking. As long as we maintain our own voice in this crisis, we will not hear the voice of God speaking in the midst of trial.

Without this submissive faith, submissive silence, and submissive fear, we cannot properly approach God in praying for revival. It is essential to recognize God's

sovereignty so that we begin to pray for His agenda, not our own. In recognizing God’s sovereignty over everything, we will begin to pray for God to be glorified first of all. It will bring peace in the midst of the storm because we know that God is in control. God is on the throne. I will keep silence. It will put our troubles in perspective because we recognize that God is in control. And so let our recognition of God’s sovereignty bring us to the throne of grace for God to work in the midst of COVID-19. A prayer for revival recognizes God’s sovereignty and it cries out for the revival of God’s people.

### **The Revival of God’s People**

Submission to God’s sovereignty in judgment is not mere resignation to what God is doing. A recognition of God’s sovereignty moves us to bend the knee crying out in repentance and faith. It puts God on the throne of our lives, and puts His priorities as ours. And one of His priorities is the holiness of His people. This priority is seen throughout the Scriptures in the admonition, “Be holy as I am holy” (Lev. 11:45; 19:2; 20:7; 20:26; 1 Peter 1:15–16). When God sends judgments, it ought to make His people sit up and take notice and examine their lives. This is why He was sending judgments upon Judah—to purify and refine her, to make her more like Himself. Likewise, we see that the church today is not exempt from God’s judgments. There is much to learn for the church in this crisis. This is not only for our church, but for the worldwide church. God’s judgments are refining judgments, not annihilating judgments. That’s what we need to understand. They are refining judgments for His people. He has His purposes and one of them is discipline—for the purification and holiness of His people and church. There is this principle that runs throughout Scripture and human history—as the church goes, so goes the nation. When the witness of



the church and the people of God begins to wane and the church's voice is lost to the shrill voice of wickedness and sin, to the culture's pleasures and gods, the nation will become unhinged from its moral compass. This principle is emphasized in God's words to Solomon in 2 Chronicles 7:14, "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land." As the church goes, so goes the nation.

This is what Habakkuk prays for—the awakening and reviving of God's people in the midst of Judah, "O LORD, revive thy work in the midst of the years." He invokes the covenant name of Yahweh, calling to mind God's faithfulness to His people. In the midst of calamity, God will not forsake His people, but He does call us to repent of our lukewarmness, shallow theology, false worship, and even backsliding lawlessness and immorality. And so we are called to cry out to God for Him to revive His work in the midst of the years, in the midst of calamity and judgment, for the revival, the quickening, and the awakening of His people, to cry out for the restoration of the joy of God's salvation, to put Christ at the forefront of our minds and hearts again. The word *revive* can be understood in several different ways in this passage. In the first place, it speaks of God preserving His work. And so we can pray, "O LORD, preserve Thy people, Thy church to be a reflection of Thy holiness and Thy saving grace in Christ Jesus. Preserve the church to be a leavening witness in the world so that others will be drawn in. Do not let Thy work die in this church, in this heart. Preserve Thy work that Thou hast begun." It also speaks of keeping alive or making alive. And so we can pray, "O LORD, keep alive Thy people, Thy church in the midst of calamities. Let the world see the abundant life of Jesus in Thy people, their

love for Thee and neighbor, their love and zeal for Thy holiness. Make Thy people more alive than they have been to this point. Make sinners alive outside of the church and bring them into the fellowship of the saints so they can see Thy holiness.” The word can also mean *to purify*. And so we can pray, “O LORD, in the midst of Thy judgment, purify Thy people. Help Thy people to be a mirror of Thy holiness, to reflect more accurately who Thou art to the world. Redeem the failures, the sin that we have committed in this area, of not reflecting who Thou art.” We need to pray for God’s revival of His work in His people.

Why pray for the revival of God’s people? Why pray for your own soul to be revived in this crisis? Because God’s great concern is the holiness of His people and of His church. The apostle Peter points out God’s priorities in line with Habakkuk’s prayer, “For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God” (1 Peter 4:17). God was coming to purify Judah, beginning at the house of God; what would be the end of the Chaldeans who did not obey the gospel of God? God was going to reckon with them. But Peter continues, “Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator” (v. 19). God’s great pursuit is not the stop of the virus. God’s great pursuit is the pursuit of your holiness, of your spiritual vitality and life in Christ Jesus. The pursuit of God is to awaken you from your lethargy and bring you to the throne of God to cry out for revival. The revival of God’s people is part of the work of God in this generation. And if this is the pressing need, then we need to urgently pray, confessing our sins —individual, corporate, national, and global sins— and seeking God’s mercy afresh for our generation and

that which follows, for God to revive His people and our witness, even if it means that we go through this calamity.

### **The Revelation of God's Work**

The prayer for revival also calls for the revelation of God's work. Habakkuk is not only concerned with the revival of God's people, but He wants God's work to be known and revealed. There is a universal aspect to Habakkuk's request when He prays, "in the midst of the years make known." Even in the midst of the worst calamity that is going to come upon Judah, Habakkuk prays for God's work and glory to be revealed. Here is a man who has learned submissive faith. Judgment is coming, judgment is here, and in the midst of the years, in the midst of that calamity he is praying for God's glory to be revealed. Indeed, God's work will be revealed especially through challenging times. Because in God's economy, nothing is ever wasted. He will work. He will use COVID-19 for His own glory, even if we can't see it yet. The world is gripped by fear, but the church should not be gripped by the fear of disease or even death; rather, we should be gripped by the fear of God and the desire that God would be known and would make Himself known in the world around us.

And so this request for revival on Habakkuk's part is not only limited to the people of God, but it extends for God's glory to be known around the world. That is what we are called to pray for as a church, as believers. As God purifies and revives His people through the judgments that come upon the world, this often spills over into the world at large. When we come to terms with the sovereignty of God, we learn to pray big and think big. If God is on the throne of heaven and earth, surely He can glorify Himself throughout the entire world in revival and spiritual awakening. Habakkuk prays big. He prays for the knowledge of God to fill the world, and so should

we. In the verses following our text, Habakkuk calls to mind the redemptive acts of God in leading Israel from Egypt through the wilderness. This was displayed to the nations around them. In the midst of judgment, the world is watching the church and what the church will do in response to this trial. What will your response show to the watching world, believer? Will your response be one primarily for the glory of God, “O LORD, let your work in the church be known to the world, so that others would be drawn to Christ and know the life that is in Jesus”? Within our own families there are those who are unsaved, those who do not know this Christ. We pray for them with renewed zeal and purpose.

This request for God’s work to be revealed has evangelistic implications as well. God’s purposes begin with the church, but certainly don’t end there. As He refines you and me and revives His work in us again with spiritual awakening and renewal, calling us to follow Him with fresh zeal by His Spirit, His purpose is for that work to be revealed in the world around us. This is how revival begins and spreads as the glory of God is exalted around the world. Spiritual awakening and revival are the work of the Holy Spirit, heightening in His people a conviction of sin against a holy God, a holy love for Christ and His saving love, and a heightened zeal for the souls of others, through which God reveals His work in the midst of judgments. Will you pray for the revelation of God’s work even in the midst of judgment, beginning with you and spreading far and wide for the glory of God? When we recognize God’s sovereignty and cry out for God’s work of revival, it is such prayer that should move us to feel the heaviness of souls that are living under the wrath of God and their own sin. Reading the news, the thing that tore at me the most is that people are dying alone. There is no one to tell them of Christ, no one to share a prayer with them, a word

of compassion. There are doctors and nurses who do that, but there are many who are dying alone, left to themselves. That is a picture of what is happening in the world around us, dying inwardly without anyone to tell them about the need of repentance, without anyone to tell them of Christ. Such prayer should move us to pity our fellow human being who is without Christ. Such prayer should move us to bring the message of the gospel to them that the wrath of God against sin is fully satisfied in the cross of Jesus Christ. That's where we need to be ourselves, and that is also the message we need to bring to others.

### **The Remembrance of God's Mercy**

The prayer for revival also calls to pray for the remembrance of God's mercy. And yet the fact remains that we are living in times of difficulty and affliction, under the hand of God's judgment. This raises the question: isn't it crazy only to pray for revival? Should we not be praying for God's wrath to dissipate, for the virus to go away? Should we not pray for the judgment to cease? Yes, we can certainly pray for those things. But a person who lives by faith recognizes that the judgments of God are necessary in His sovereignty. A person who lives by faith does not murmur against the judgments of God, but submits in faith, silence, and fear, and then cries out for God to use that trial for spiritual good. Habakkuk's final petition in verse 2 again demonstrates a life of faith: "In wrath remember mercy."

What is Habakkuk doing? He is reminding God of His own character. On the one hand, he reminds God of His perfect righteousness and holiness, expressed in His wrath against sin. On the other hand, he asks God to temper that wrath with mercy, with pity, and with compassion. These two things are not incompatible. Habakkuk asks God to temper His strange work of judgment with His familiar work of mercy. He is not asking for the judgment

to be removed, but he uses this as an opportunity to pray for mercy, to pray for pity. We can do the same. Habakkuk can only pray these words because he had learned to humble himself before God. He was silent at first, recognizing His own sin. He humbled himself for his own sin before a holy God. He humbled himself before God for the sins of Judah and then he prayed for God's mercy. This prayer for mercy does not come apart from humbling ourselves. This prayer for mercy comes as a result of humbling ourselves. If we are just praying for mercy, then we are missing the point; we are again dictating to God what He should be doing to alleviate our concerns. But if we are praying for God's people to be revived, for God's work to be revealed, for God's agenda to be done in this trial, then we can pray for mercy.

So many are praying for God to remove the virus and let them move on from the calamity. That is important, but it does not take into account the holiness and judgment of God, nor does it reckon with our sin. Some of us are already moving beyond this trial and saying what we are going to do when this is all over. I confess that I did that too, thinking ahead. But let's pause for a moment, recognizing the holiness and sovereignty of God. Without repentance and humbling for our sin, we will not rightly recognize our need for mercy. Our need for mercy begins in front of the cross, for our souls. Our need for mercy begins at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Our desperate need is for God's reviving work and for His mercy revealed in Jesus Christ. Without that mercy we would be utterly undone. We would not know where to turn.

So how can we intercede for the church, for our own hearts, for our nation, for our communities, and for our neighbors? By recognizing God's sovereignty in judgment, by crying out for the revival of God's people and church, including you and me, by asking God to reveal

His preserving, saving, and reviving work in the midst of judgment, and finally by asking God to remember mercy in the midst of wrath and judgment, to show mercy on sinners. For God to turn things around. In the midst of wrath, LORD, remember mercy. The parallels are interesting between this prayer and Noah's situation in the ark. Habakkuk prays for God to remember mercy. When Noah was in the ark, we read that God remembered Noah, and the flood waters began to recede. God turned things around for Noah. God would eventually turn things around for Judah. Christ would come in the glorious revelation of the gospel. The hope of Judah would come for salvation. We read of this in verse 13, "Thou wentest forth for the salvation of thy people, even for salvation with thine anointed; thou woundedst the head out of the house of the wicked, by discovering the foundation unto the neck. Selah." This is messianic, speaking of Christ who is going to come as a result of all this. Salvation comes through judgment. God will turn things around, when He remembers His mercy, and so we can pray for His mercy in the midst of this judgment. But let's be careful to remember that God is on the throne and we are sinful human beings, undeserving of His mercy and blessings.

How can we do this more effectively? On Wednesday, April 1st, the elders and pastors of the denomination are calling for a day of fasting and prayer. This prayer is designated for the examination and humbling of ourselves before God, for Him to purify His church, to make her alive, purifying her of deadness and making her alive unto God. It is designated for us to pray for God's intervention and to begin His work of revival in the days in which we live. I leave you with this question as we turn to prayer: When will the church begin to pray for awakening?

- When the church becomes disgusted with our sin.  
As we come together for prayer and fasting, may our

sin become disgusting before a holy and righteous God.

- When the church becomes passionately concerned for the next generation—the generation that is far ahead of us in immorality and the things that come their way. As we come together to pray and to fast, let us intercede for the next generation, who, if God will not work now, will face an onslaught of evil that we have never seen before.
- When the church becomes convinced of God’s displeasure. Like Habakkuk, may we be convinced of God’s displeasure against sin.
- When the church becomes submissive to Christ. As we pray and as we fast, may we submit to our holy Lord who sits on the throne, who does all things well, who will come to judge the living and the dead.
- When the church becomes aware of God’s promises. When we come together for prayer and fasting, let us not only humble ourselves, but also take hold of the promises of God in His Word and cry out, “It is time for thee, Lord, to work: for [we] have made void thy law” (Ps. 119:126).
- When the church becomes jealous of God’s work in the past.<sup>2</sup> There’s a pattern throughout history—calamities, revivals. Actually first, there is moral declension, then calamities, and then revivals. Are we jealous of the revivals of the past? Are we jealous of the Great Awakening that swept this land? Are we jealous of the Reformation, crying out to God to revive His work in the midst of the years?

Will you pray and fast for spiritual awakening so that God will be recognized as God? This is our greatest need.

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2. These thoughts are collected from Terry Schlachter’s book, *The Next Great Awakening*.



May God grant an outpouring of His Spirit upon us, upon our church, upon our families, upon the church at large, upon our denomination, upon our nation, upon our seminary, upon our schools, upon our communities and the churches within them. Because God is on His holy throne, let all the earth keep silence and then let us pray. Amen.



# **The Spirit of Grace and Supplication**

*Dr. Joel R. Beeke*

Scripture Reading: Zechariah 12:9–13:1

Text: Zechariah 12:10

After the murder of Caesar by Brutus, a Roman senator tried to provoke the people to revenge the death of the late emperor by bringing out his bloody robe. He held up the robe for all the people to see, and cried, “Here is the robe of your late emperor.” When the rebellious people saw it, they repented of their sins, and took revenge upon the murderers of their emperor. Similarly, in the preaching of the gospel, when the bloody robe of Christ is lifted up, and the message is proclaimed, “Behold what sin has cost Jesus,” the Holy Spirit causes us, if we are believers, to repent and to take revenge upon our sins.

We wish to consider this blessed work of the Spirit, flowing out of Christ’s suffering and death, based on Zechariah 12:10, “I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn.”

With God’s help, we wish to consider the theme, *The Spirit of Grace and Supplication*, in three points: the

Spirit's given names, the Spirit's saving work, and the Spirit's personal application.

### **The Spirit's Given Names**

Zechariah was a post-exilic prophet—that is, he prophesied to Israel after the Babylonian exile. A minority of the people—about 42,000—had returned from Babylon to Israel. No doubt this minority hoped that they would be only the first wave of many waves of successive return so that national life would be renewed in Israel. God commanded the people to rebuild the temple and reinstate His worship. Fortifying their souls with God's promises, this minority were longing for the day when all the nations of the earth would gather themselves together in Jerusalem to worship the Lord in His temple.

But soon a harsh, painful reality set in. After a difficult time of drought and local resistance, this minority became despondent. Soon they abandoned God's commands, and everyone began to look after their own families. They settled on the land, enlarging their homes and fields. They neglected the worship of God, forgot the importance of the temple, and abandoned the quest for reestablishing their national identity. Spiritual lethargy abounded. Even idol worship began to rear its head.

It is still the same today, isn't it? If we're not involved with God and His work and truth, we backslide rather than progress. We grow distant from that spiritual life which we once craved and enjoyed. Our spiritual aspirations wither.

God then sends Zechariah to the remnant who remained on the land—now down to about 22,000. Zechariah brings to a despondent, despairing people a striking message. God looks at His sinful people and determines to transform them, to change them: "I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem,

the spirit of grace and of supplications” (Zech. 12:10). This is a striking contrast to the previous verse: “It shall come to pass in that day, that I will seek to destroy all the nations that come against Jerusalem” (12:9). God says that He will pour out His just fury on the nations, even as He promises to pour out His Spirit upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem. God will turn in mercy to His people. When God does so, His mercy begins with the outpouring of His Spirit of grace and supplication.

God will pour out His Spirit upon the house of David—that is, upon the princes and rulers of Israel; and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem—namely, the common people. He will pour out His Spirit upon all of Israel combined—upon a guilty nation; upon a guilty David, who committed adultery and murder; upon Jerusalem, the city that would crucify the Lord of glory. The effect will be that “they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn” (12:10).

When we read this text, we immediately think about what happened on the day of Pentecost. Zechariah 12:10 was literally fulfilled on that glorious day when Peter preached the gospel to the Jews, accusing them of crucifying their Messiah. Three thousand were pricked in their hearts. They cried out, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). They mourned over that Savior whom they had pierced.

Zechariah 12:10 is a fulfilled prophecy. We bring this prophecy before you again because we believe that God continues to fulfil this prophecy until the end of time; the Spirit is still being poured out today. Sinners are still brought to mourn for the Messiah whom they have pierced.

*The Spirit of Grace*

The first question we must ask is: What or who is that Spirit the Lord promises to pour out? *The Spirit of grace and supplication*. The Holy Spirit is here called a Spirit of grace. The Holy Spirit is a Spirit of grace because of the mediatorial work of the Lord Jesus Christ. We must never forget that the Holy Spirit, like the Father and the Son, was also provoked by the sin of man. The Holy Spirit was also angry with man for transgressing God's law and breaking His covenant. When we fell in Adam, the Holy Spirit withdrew Himself and His blessed influences from fallen man. Man was left void of all spiritual good. Man was left behind, dead in trespasses and sins.

The Bible teaches us that nothing is to be feared so much as the breath of the Almighty. Isaiah 11:4, speaking of God's wrath, says that the breath of the Lord shall slay the wicked. That breath is symbolic of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is angry with the sins of the wicked.

But Christ's mediatorial work in dying for sinners opened the way for the Spirit to be a Spirit of grace, mercy, love, and compassion. That's why Christ said to the disciples, "It is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you" (John 16:7). Christ first had to complete His meritorious mediatorial work. He had to complete the mission assigned to Him by His Father and return to His Father—and then the Holy Spirit would pour out Himself and His gracious influences. The Spirit's outpouring was dependent on the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. This outpouring was a fruit of Jesus's mission being accomplished. Because of Christ's work, the Bible can call the Holy Spirit this beautiful name, *Spirit of Grace*.

The Spirit is also called Spirit of Grace because He authors all spiritual graces in sinners. He is the author of all genuine conviction of sin. He authors the grace of

repentance, the grace of faith, the grace of sanctification, the grace of perseverance, the graces of love and humility.

The Spirit is the author of all spiritual life. What sap is to a tree to make it bear fruit, what electricity is to a lightbulb to cause it to produce light, what air is to an instrument to make it play, so the Holy Spirit is related to all spiritual life. He is the author of all spiritual grace.

God's people experience the truth of this doctrine. They experience as a living reality that the Holy Spirit is the author of all grace. Have you also experienced this reality?

Without the Holy Spirit we remain dead in trespasses and sins, impenitent, and unbelieving. Just as Jesus said, "Without me ye can do nothing" (John 15:5), the believer experiences that, after being born again, "Without the Spirit of Christ, I can perform nothing acceptable to God. I cannot give myself one spiritual grace. I cannot give myself faith. I cannot give myself hands to receive Jesus or arms to embrace Jesus. I cannot retain what has been given. I cannot endure to the end without the Spirit of grace. I am utterly dependent on Jesus Christ and His Spirit." Praise God that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Grace.

### *The Spirit of Supplication*

The Holy Spirit is not only the Spirit of Grace. He is also the *Spirit of Supplication*. That is, He is the ultimate author of all true prayer. When we were little children, our parents taught us to pray. That is good, necessary, and unforgettable. But we need another teacher—we need the Holy Spirit to teach us to pray. He is the Spirit of supplication. As soon as He takes up residence in the heart of a sinner, the result is, "Behold, that sinner prayeth" (see Acts 9:11).

When the Holy Spirit begins His saving work, Jeremiah says that such sinners will come to the Lord with

weeping and supplication (Jer. 31:29). The Holy Spirit teaches us to cry for mercy and to beg for pardon. Without the Spirit's groaning within us, our prayer is little more than lip-work.

Grace and supplication are inseparable. When there is grace, there is supplication. Where there is much grace, there is much supplication. Where there is no grace, there is no genuine supplication.

Supplication here means *pleading*—pleading out of shame and desperation. It is akin to the groaning we read of in Romans 8:26, "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered."

There are two intercessors for the Christian. We have an intercessor within the veil—Jesus Christ; He is objectively interceding for us. But then we have a second intercessor within our hearts. He is subjectively interceding for us; that is, the Spirit of God is touching the wellsprings of our affections. He is inciting prayer, He is provoking prayer, He is stirring us up to prayer.

Let me illustrate. Say you are attending an organ concert, where beautiful and reverent music is being played. You see the organist take his place at the organ, and watch his skillful fingers, that have practiced for years, fly up and down the keyboard; you marvel at the beautiful sound that is made. So the Spirit of God touches the strings of a believer's heart and creates a sort of music of the soul, and the consequence is that we cannot but pour out our desires to God. And when we do so, God recognizes that this is the work of His Spirit within us.

"We know not what we should pray for as we ought," but the Spirit teaches us. This is the extraordinary thing about prayer. Sometimes you go on your knees and you feel as dead as a piece of wood. You have had that experience



many times, and so have I. At times, I have said to myself, "How am I going to get through even a few minutes on my knees of addressing God?" You begin, but it doesn't work; it is terrible. You try again, and it is just as difficult. You struggle on. You pray that you may pray. Perhaps you are just about to give up when you say, "I'll try a bit longer," and then all of a sudden the Spirit of God fills your heart and it becomes easy to pray, even to pray at some length. You then arise from your knees and say, "Oh, that I had more time to pray. This is heaven upon earth; this is a heaven before heaven; this is the enjoyment of God!" Then you brush away your tears and you say to yourself, "What a glorious, beautiful thing it is to lay hold of God in prayer, to hold communion with the living God!" Well, that is because it is the Spirit helping us. We are not on our own. Christ is helping us at the throne and the Spirit is helping us here below in the depths of our mind and soul. So the doctrine here is that we should strive to pray in the Spirit.

Do you know the difference between praying and praying in the Spirit? Paul does not simply tell us to pray; he says we are to pray in the Spirit. In Ephesians 6:18 he says, "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit." So there is a difference between prayer and *prayer*. And here is a good test for your spiritual progress. Do you know the difference between prayer and *prayer*? Would you know the difference between praying, and praying *in the Spirit*? Now, this is not an absolute distinction, of course, but it is a relative one. In other words, sometimes when people pray, they receive help. Occasionally they get *extraordinary help*. Too often we feel as though we are struggling more or less on our own as we pray. But we are always desiring to get through that striving to the point where we are given that spiritual help. And that is what we should look for and wait upon God to give us. Whether

it be relative help or extraordinary help, it is the “Spirit [who] helpeth our infirmities” (Rom. 8:26).

But how exactly does the Holy Spirit help us in praying? What does this term “helpeth” mean here: “the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities.” About this word *helpeth*, Charles Hodge says, “This word means to take hold of any thing with another. To take part of his burden or work.”<sup>1</sup> Calvin puts it this way: “The Spirit takes part of the burden with which our weakness is weighed down.”<sup>2</sup>

Let me illustrate what Paul, Calvin, and Hodge are saying. Imagine there is a large piece of wood, like a plank. Suppose a young boy, about seven, sees this plank, and wants to try out his own strength, even though his father is right behind him. “Let me do it, Dad,” he says. This is an common thing, isn’t it? Most boys that are growing in strength like to try out their vigor. So the boy picks up one end of the plank, and he can lift it six or so inches off the ground, maybe a foot. His father smiles and, realizing what the boy is up to, he comes behind him and says, “Now son, you take that end and I will take the other end, and between us we will carry it out through the door.” So the boy is delighted and he lifts it with all his strength. But the father skillfully, concealing somewhat what he is doing, puts both his hands under the plank near the center, so as to take ninety percent of the weight, and the boy, of course, thinks he is carrying a considerable portion, helping his father through the door with the plank. Now that is what this word *helpeth* means.

Prayer can be a great burden. The work of prayer is really too great for us. We are like children. Our strength is not up to it. “But,” says Paul, “Someone is helping our

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1. Charles Hodge, *Commentary of the Epistle to the Romans* (Philadelphia: William S. & Alfred Marten, 1864), 437.

2. John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 8:26–27.

infirmities.” Someone is there—the gracious Holy Spirit of supplication is there to help. We are not on our own with this burden. His mighty arms are underneath the burden, and we go forward carrying out our little end. The Spirit carries the bulk of the weight—in true prayer we are mostly following Him. In the work of praying, there are two persons with one burden. The burden is the cause of Christ upon the earth and the manifestation of the glory of God in the world.

A true Christian is one who can't be content without the Spirit of grace and supplication. He or she can't be content with prayerless praying. To be content with prayerless praying is like a sailor being content without any wind after he hoists the sail of his boat. You can't sail when there's no wind. Pray much for the wind of the Spirit. By all means, do set sail; do use the means. Do show the Lord His own handwriting; plead on His own promises. But remember, only the Spirit can empower prayer to move the soul. Without the Spirit's movement, the sails of prayer will hang limp.

A true Christian seeks grace to maintain the priority of prayer in everything he does. He strives to live out the advice of Bunyan: “You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed.”

Now this blessed Spirit of grace and supplication shall be poured out, Zechariah says, and the result will be: “And they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son.” Zechariah is speaking here of the Spirit's work in producing evangelical repentance.

### **The Spirit's Saving Work**

The great end in view of all the operations of the Holy Spirit is to glorify Christ. Christ Himself said, “He will glorify

me” (John 16:14). That is what our text says here. The Holy Spirit will be poured out, and the result will be that Christ will be glorified. He will teach sinners to look upon Christ. Our text says, “They shall look upon me whom they have pierced” (Zech. 12:10). The Holy Spirit will make a sinner look to Christ—but, says our text, a Christ whom that sinner has pierced. Usually, the Holy Spirit does not get us to look first to Christ as our Redeemer and Savior, but as one whom we have rejected; one whom we have despised; one whose blood we have counted as an unclean thing; one whom we have crucified.

Our text is powerful: “They shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn” (Zech. 12:10). This prophecy was literally fulfilled on Pentecost. The multitude listened intently to Peter’s sermon. When Peter proved from the prophets that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah, their amazement gave way to perplexity, then to conviction and sorrow. When the multitude heard Peter’s terrible charge against them, “Jesus, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken and by wicked hands have crucified and slain”—they stood crushed before the bar of God and the bar of their own conscience. Then they cried, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” This prophecy was then fulfilled literally, “They shall look on me whom they have pierced.”

Those Jews began to look on Christ. They had despised and rejected Jesus. They didn’t even think Him worthy to be looked upon. They didn’t want to look upon Him. They didn’t want to think about the possibility that He could be the Messiah. But now, they began to reflect on what had happened with Christ. They began to see that their sins pierced Christ. The Holy Spirit persuaded them that the

one against whom they had cried, "Away with him; crucify him," was, in fact, the Messiah of God!

They mourned as one mourns for his only son. Their hearts were wounded, broken with sorrow and shame. The reality was crushing—"We are murderers of the promised Messiah!" The verse after our text, Zechariah 12:11, became an experiential reality. There was "a great mourning in Jerusalem." This was from the powerful, convicting, and blessed effect of the Spirit's outpouring.

Do you think that this prophecy is only applicable to the Jews because they were the ones who rejected and crucified Christ? Dear friends, we are guilty of the same crime. What the Jews did literally, we are inclined to do spiritually when we live under the preaching of the gospel and do not embrace the Messiah by faith. We reject Christ every time we hear the gospel and do not repent and believe in the Son of God. We crucify Jesus Christ with our unbelief.

What is unbelief? Unbelief is enmity against God. Unbelief is refusing to believe the record God gave of His only-begotten Son. Unbelief is disobedience to the Word of God. We reject and crucify Christ when we cleave to our sins and idols. We crucify Christ by cleaving to our self-righteousness; by refusing to bow under Christ as our Lord and Master, by refusing to take His yoke upon us as His disciples.

When Christ preached on earth, many were displeased. They were displeased because His sermons condemned them. His messages condemned their self-righteousness and worldliness. Christ preached, "Wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matt. 7:13). Christ said, "For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the

righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter the kingdom of God” (Matt. 5:20).

Many picked up stones to kill Christ when He spoke such things because His preaching condemned them. And we do the same thing by nature. But we do not see this; nor do we believe this. In our foolishness, we say, “If I had been living when Jesus was on earth, I surely would have been one of His disciples.”

Unbelief is the reigning and damning sin of the outward Christian world. And yet, the Christian world is not aware of the tragedy of unbelief.

I’m afraid some of you scarcely think about these things. Some of you don’t even realize the seriousness of being unconverted. You don’t see it as a sin. You don’t realize the damning nature of your unbelief. You never stop to consider that it is your unbelief that will bring you to hell. You never weep over your unbelief. You never despise its cursed nature. You never bemoan it.

Unbelief is the crowning sin we commit against that God to whom we owe everything that we are, everything that we have, and unto whom we are obligated to give all that we are.

Many unconverted people think of themselves as victims of Satan, as people who are to be pitied, rather than as criminals. You think of yourselves as people who are to be *excused* rather than *accused* for being unbelievers. You say within yourselves, “It is not my fault; I can’t help it. What can I do about it? I can’t convert myself. I can’t bring myself to the right place.” How few think of being unconverted as a sin—as a terrible crime!

Some of you think that you’re not so bad. You’re outwardly moral. You live a decent life. You attend a conservative, Christian church faithfully. You believe in the truths of the Bible.

My friend, that is not enough. I fear that the devils believe in the Bible more than some of you. The devil believes more of Christ than you do. Of the devils it is written that they believe and tremble (James 2:19)—and that is more than some among us do. The truth is, my unconverted friend, you are an unbeliever. That means that you are unwilling to believe the testimony of God concerning yourself and concerning God. An unbeliever is an enemy of God and Christ.

Do you know what it is to be an unbeliever? Let me explain by way of illustration. Think of a sick man who has a particular disease that only one medicine, with God's help, can be used to cure him. What would you think if that man refused to take the only possible medicine that could cure him? That is an unbeliever. An unbeliever despises the only medicine that can save him from destruction—the shed blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ.

My friend, be honest with yourself. You are unconverted because you do not want God to be King over you. When Christ says, “Ye will not come unto me that ye may have life” (John 5:40), He also says of you. Deep down in your soul, you know that is true. You are not desiring Christ, you are not looking to Christ. You are not willing to forsake sin and surrender your idols. You are not willing to crucify your flesh and renounce your self-righteousness. You are not willing to be saved as a poor sinner trusting exclusively in Jesus's blood and righteousness.

But you do not see it—or, perhaps, more accurately, you do not want to see it. By nature, we hate to hear the truth about ourselves. Therefore, when Christ taught the Pharisees that they were in bondage, that the devil was their master, and that they needed to be delivered by Him, they took up stones to stone Him. Christ said, “Do you

want to stone me, because I have told you the truth?” (see John 10:32). He told them the truth about themselves, and therefore they hated Him.

It is no different today. People still don't want the truth to be told about themselves. By nature, they still cry out, “Away with Him! We don't want all our righteousness to be grounded in Jesus Christ alone.” By nature, we are like these pious Jews who had come from afar to Jerusalem to celebrate the Feast of the Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles. They thought of themselves as pious and strict persons, believers in Jehovah, lovers of God's law, keepers of His ordinances, travelers to heaven. But then the Holy Spirit was poured out. They began to look upon Christ, began to see the truth about themselves and what they had done. They saw that they had rejected and crucified the Messiah, the only divine remedy for all their sins. They realized the enormity of their crime.

When the Holy Spirit teaches us the truth about ourselves, and our rejection of Jesus Christ, we see the exceeding sinfulness of sin in our own hearts and lives. Then we see that we have sinned against a holy and good God—against a God who has sent “His only begotten Son into the world, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

When the Holy Spirit is poured out upon us, it becomes our sorrow that we have sinned against such a God. Then we confess, “How have I dared to sin against such a God? How have I dared to reject the Savior whom He has sent—a merciful, gracious Savior? Woe is me, I have despised the blood of the New Testament! I have rejected the merciful invitations of the gospel! My sins have nailed the promised Messiah to the tree. My sins are the cause of the suffering and death of the Lord Jesus. I have repeated the crime of the Jews against the cross. Oh, it rings in my ears: ‘whom ye have crucified.’”



Zechariah says that the bitterness of this mourning and true repentance may be compared to two sad occurrences: First, the grief a parent feels upon the loss of a firstborn or of an only son. Our text says, "They shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn." According to Jewish custom, this grief would be the greatest sorrow God could lay upon a family. Jeremiah speaks of this mourning in Jeremiah 6:26 as a "most bitter lamentation."

Second, the grief the Israelites felt when the God-fearing Josiah was slain in battle by the Egyptians. For we read in the verse following our text, "In that day shall there be a great mourning in Jerusalem, as the mourning of Hadadrimmon in the valley of Megiddon" (Zech. 12:11). When Josiah was slain at Hadadrimmon, a town in the valley of Megiddon, you can read in 2 Chronicles 35:24–25 that there was profound lamentation in Judah and Israel. Jeremiah wrote a book called Lamentations, in which he tells us that all of Judah and Israel mourned the loss of this God-fearing king. So, says Zechariah, a sinner who sees that he has pierced Christ with his sins, may be compared with these two events.

This sorrow is bitter and sincere because it sorrows over sin as sin. Then we do not sorrow only over sin's consequences—for the harm it does to us. But we sorrow for sin as sin because we see the dishonor and wrong that sin does to a holy and merciful God. Sin always has a Godward thrust. Sin is a grave matter. He who gives us our breath has so humbled Himself that, though He is the Creator of heaven and earth, He is affected by our deeds. Sin, as it were, pierces the Son of God.

Sin especially becomes sin when we see our sins in the light of Christ's sufferings. When we view our sins as the cause of the *red glass* of Christ's sufferings, as Thomas

Watson put it, then we will mourn “for him as one mourneth for his only son.”

The sufferings of Christ have been called God’s commentaries on sin—commentaries which the penitent sinner reads with sorrow. There is no better commentary on the subject of sin than the sufferings and death of Christ. To know what sin is, you must read this commentary on sin. You must see sin in the face of Christ’s agony. When our fathers tried to expound the sinfulness of sin in the Form for the Celebration of the Lord’s Supper, they place sin in the context of Golgotha: “The wrath of God against sin is so great,” they say, “that rather than that God would let sin go unpunished, He has punished sin in the bitter and shameful death of His Son on the cross.”

When Peter saw his sins against Christ in the light of Christ’s sufferings and love, he went out and wept bitterly. There is nothing so humbling as to see that my sins have nailed Christ to the tree. My sins have pierced the merciful Savior. When the rock of the heart is struck by the rod of the gospel, then the waters gush out.

Brokenness of heart and contrition of spirit is what God calls for in the context of Golgotha. This godly sorrow, which works “repentance not to be repented of” (2 Cor. 7:10), is the result of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

The glorious promise unveiled at the beginning of the next chapter is designed especially for such mourners: “In that day there shall be a fountain opened to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem for sin and for uncleanness” (Zech. 13:1).

A fountain opened for sin and uncleanness! Plentiful cleansing—more than you could ever need—enough, as Luther said, for a thousand worlds. This fountain is a tremendous illustration of God’s utter ability and willingness to save.

Zechariah is one of several prophets who often draws us back to certain portions of the Old Testament by using rare Hebrew words, sometimes, as in this case, using technical terms. The terms, *sin and uncleanness*, when used together in Hebrew, describe a particularly difficult and heinous state of defilement. In Numbers 19, we have the account of the red heifer, the most awesome of all the rites of purification that the people of Israel had, apart from the Great Day of Atonement. A red heifer or cow was taken out of the camp, slaughtered, and burnt. Its ashes were gathered together and used in combination with water as a rite of purification. So thoroughly sacred was this rite that anyone who came into the slightest contact with the red heifer and its ashes was regarded as unclean. This rite was used to cleanse people from every kind of defilement.

And that is what Zechariah is telling us: even sin and uncleanness can be cleansed—not by a little sprinkling of water with ashes from a red heifer, but by “a fountain opened to the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.” It is an everlasting, ever-present, ever-flowing fountain that is able to cleanse the chief sinner. It reminds us, doesn’t it, of Romans 5:6: “For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.”

This fountain is God’s pure, sovereign grace. We need a thousand tongues to sing our great Redeemer’s praise for this open fountain of blood that invites everyone to come to Jesus just as they are and be saved by drinking from its fullness.

Sinners who have pierced Christ shall be given to look upon Christ as being crucified *for* their sins. First they look upon Him whom they have pierced, rejected, and despised—and see with horror that their sins were the cause of His suffering. But now they may look upon Him who loved them and did not reject them. Now they see that

His sufferings are the cause of their salvation from sin. Now they embrace with experiential reality the fact that “he was wounded for our transgressions; bruised for our iniquities” (Isa. 53:5).

Did you notice that Zechariah 13:1 says that this open fountain is for the very same people: “to the house of David and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem”? Oh, what a wonder His grace is! God turns our sorrow into joy when we may see by faith that this fountain is opened, when we are led to the fountain of Jesus’s blood. When we may embrace Him as our Substitute, we know unspeakable joy. Then we begin to understand, as the Lord’s Supper Form in Reformed liturgy says: that “whereas you would otherwise have suffered eternal death, I have given my body and shed my blood for you—even unto death.”<sup>3</sup>

The Holy Spirit teaches proper communicants to look upon Christ: to look upon Christ crucified—Christ crucified *by* us and Christ crucified *for* us. Such lookers are welcome, yes, commanded, to come and show forth the death of the Lord till He comes again (Heb. 9:28).

### **The Spirit’s Personal Application**

Zechariah 12 describes the conversion of Jews—of religious people—of people who have lived under the means of grace. When a thief is converted, he will mourn over his stealing; when an adulterer is converted, he will mourn over his adulteries. But when a gospel-despiser is converted, he will mourn over despising the gospel.

What is your sin? Theft? Adultery? Yes, in the heart—but most likely not in practice. Your sin in practice—the sin of the religious world—is the rejection of Jesus Christ as the exclusive Messiah. Peter tells the religious Jews in Acts 4 that they have killed God’s holy Child, Jesus.

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3. *The Psalter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 138.

So wicked, so full of enmity, is a religious heart against the gospel.

Perhaps you think you're not guilty of that crime. You have many excuses for why you're not converted—even after hearing gospel sermons for decades. You say you *cannot* convert yourself, but you don't admit the deeper problem: you *will not* be converted. You *cannot* because you *will not*. *Your unwillingness is an active sin against God and His gospel.* You need to see that and become guilty under that truth. The sooner you stop excusing yourself, friend, the better. We can answer all your excuses, with the words of an old divine: "Save all your objections for the judgment day, and you will see what remains of them."

Have you ever looked upon Christ as being pierced by your sin? Such a sight kills all our self-righteousness, destroys all our so-called goodness. It makes us true penitents at the foot of the cross.

All evangelical repentance has a supernatural spring. The Spirit of grace and supplication authors it. Joseph Hart wrote,

*True religion is more than notion,  
Something must be known and felt.*

If you do not look upon Christ now, whom you have pierced, the day is coming when Revelation 1:7 shall be fulfilled: "Every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him." One day you will be compelled to look upon Jesus Christ. But on that day, there will no longer be any time for mourning; God's fountain will be shut. Our hearts must be broken here by evangelical repentance; if it is not, be assured, our heart will be broken by eternal judgment hereafter.

Friend, you must begin *now* to reflect upon Him whom you have pierced; if you don't, you will begin

*hereafter* to reflect upon Him when it shall be eternally too late to be saved.

Dear believer, by grace you have been made one who looks to Christ here, and at times you long to behold Him hereafter. You long at times for the fulfillment of Hebrews 9:28: "Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation." One day you shall gaze on Him forever without any more mourning. Sorrow and sighing shall flee away; you shall be comforted with the oil of gladness. Forever you shall praise Christ, as you gaze upon the Lamb who sits in the midst of the throne. Forever, you shall take the crown from your own head and cast it at His feet, saying, "Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy, and for thy truth's sake" (Ps. 115:1).

Ask God for grace to encamp your soul at Calvary every day. Bring your sorrow for sin to Him and cling to His open fountain of blood and salvation. He has given you this imperative: "Ye believe in God, believe also in me" (John 14:1). Drink deeply from that fountain. And one day you shall experience with all the redeemed the reality that "they shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes" (Rev 7:16–17). Amen.

# **The Sons of the Father: The Younger Son**

*Dr. Mark Kelderman*

Text: Luke 15:11–32

We have before us one of the most blessed parables a preacher could preach from. One that ought to touch the hardest of hearts. One where each person, whether having departed in sin or holed up in self-righteousness, finds his life laid out. One that ought to draw every heart to the Father who is set forth in this parable. As preachers, we sometimes wonder how it can be that after so many clear presentations of the gospel people still refuse to enter the Father's house. Was the gospel not set forth clearly, simply? Why are some of you still in your sin? Why do you talk of convictions, but never come to Christ? Why do you speak of what you know you must do and yet there is no doing it, no arising and coming to the Father? Is it that the Lord lied when He swore with Himself that whosoever cometh to Him He will in no wise cast out? Impossible! I suspect, rather, as we will discover in this parable, that the fault lies with us. When we lay our lives next to this parable and compare our lives to this son, spiritually, then we will not need to point out the sin of someone else in the congregation. Rather, we will see that we are all like this son who has gone astray. God's Word is true. All who come into this world are like sheep who have gone astray; we have

sought everyone our own way. Therefore, today, if you were asked to write on a piece of paper one of two things, either “saved by faith in the blood of Christ” or “condemned for calling God a liar,” which would it be? There is nothing in between.

Many times, when people try to explain the parables that Jesus sets forth, they read into them more than what Scripture says, or they add to the parables things which are not written. We must be careful that we do not draw out interpretations from the parables that would contradict what the rest of Scripture teaches. Therefore, anytime we consider a parable we must keep several things in mind. We must remember that just because something may be omitted from the parable, it doesn't mean that it is not true or that the Word of God does not explain it in another place. Take for example the father in this parable. We will see how the love of God the Father is pictured in a glorious way as pursuing after sinners. That does not take away from the reality that God is a holy, sovereign, and just God, and that nothing happens outside His will, even though these things do not come to the foreground in this parable. We do not read anything regarding the work of Christ as the Mediator in this particular parable, yet we will see the implications of His work clearly set forth. In light of this thought, simply consider the fatted calf, and the robe and ring that were put on the son. These all point to the work of Christ, yet the mediatorial work of Christ is not the point of this parable. We read nothing specific here about the work of the Holy Spirit, but without a doubt it is the work of the Holy Spirit in the younger son's heart that causes him to come to himself and return to the father. Again, that is not the main point of what Jesus is saying in this parable. We must first understand the main point Jesus is seeking to communicate, and that point, I believe,



is the pure love of the Father for His sons, plural, who have gone astray.

If you take a look at Luke 15, you will realize that Jesus told three parables that are connected. In the first parable we have a man, a shepherd who had a hundred sheep. One of these sheep had gone astray and he seeks to find that one and bring it back home. The second parable is of a woman who had ten pieces of silver and she loses one piece, lights a candle, and sweeps the house, searching diligently until she finds it. Then, there is the third parable, which we will consider here. As you look at these three parables, you can see them from the perspective of the Trinity. The first sets forth the work of Christ as the great Shepherd, the second sets forth the work of the Holy Spirit as the One who is seeking out lost and dead sinners, and the third shows us clearly the loving Father, the heart of God. All three of the parables end with this conclusion: when a sinner repents there is joy in the presence of the angels of God.

Notice as well, that this third parable is more explicit in detailing for us what takes place in the hearts of the characters. In the first parable we are not told how the lost sheep felt, what it was thinking or doing. In the second parable we read nothing about the coins, what they felt while lost. But here in this last parable, there is something that tugs at our hearts experientially. We read about a young man, and we will get to peek into what is going on in his heart and mind. The parable speaks about the sinner, his emotions and thoughts, and about his father, his emotions, actions, and thoughts. Eventually, we also will see the reaction of the elder brother.

So, with God's help, let's turn to this parable. Today, we are looking specifically at the younger son. At another time, we will consider the elder brother and the father. The theme over all three sermons will be *The Sons of*

*the Father.* In this first sermon we will consider only the younger son, based on verses 11-24. Let's read again, starting at verse 18: "I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him."

For this sermon, we will consider the younger son: first, his rebellion; second, his repentance; and third, his reception.

### **The Younger Son's Rebellion**

This parable, along with the other two in this chapter, must be looked at in the context of verse 1. Jesus is speaking to the multitudes, and we read, "Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him." It seems there was something they heard in Jesus's message that drew their hearts to Him. But we also read in verse 2, that "the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them." It was to these two groups, the publicans and sinners and the Pharisees and scribes, that Jesus spoke these three parables. In this third parable Jesus speaks of a certain man who had two sons. We could say it more plainly this way: a certain man had two sons, a publican or a harlot as a younger son and a scribe or a Pharisee as an elder son. The father who is pictured must have been intended by Jesus to represent His Father in heaven.

We read of this young man in verse 12: "And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me." The younger son must have come to realize that he had a right to a part of the inheritance. He no doubt had heard of the pleasures that

could be found in the world and so he wanted his portion of the inheritance, that he might go out and enjoy these pleasures in his youth. This inheritance conceivably could have represented up to a third of his father's estate or livelihood. His elder brother would receive two thirds. And though he uses the word of affection—*father*—we don't find much hint of affection for his father at all. Notice how he immediately follows his request with a demand: "Give me the portion of goods that falleth to me." He does not ask his father, to see if his father thought he was able and capable at that time in his life to care for these goods; no, he just says, "Give me." He desires to indulge himself in sin and in the world. He doesn't simply ask for permission. He is demanding, "Give me the portion of goods that falleth to me."

The son must have been wearied by his father's oversight of him. He must have thought it was bondage and slavery in his father's house. Why else would he make these demands? His father's eye was always over him. He felt that. He may have felt prohibited in his sin, and because of this he wanted to be out from under his father's authority. He wanted to go out by himself and live as he pleased. He wanted to be independent. He was ready to take on the world by himself. What do we read? The father divided unto his two sons his living. All he had, he gave to his sons.

Isn't this a picture of God and of mankind? A picture of each of us in particular? Our Creator God was the father of us all. The Jews understood this even more clearly when they said, "We have father Abraham as our father." In essence they were saying, "God is our Father because of our connection to Him through Abraham." And in a sense this is true. God is the father of creation, of all people. The Scriptures are clear that in our fall into sin through Adam, we have demanded that God give us

the portion of goods that falls to us. We did not want God to rule over us. We thought He was keeping something from us. We wanted to be independent. We wanted to be in control. We thought we knew better than He. We imagined it was only slavery and bondage to serve Him. The serpent said as much and we believed it. Why would God withhold from us this one tree when so many other trees were around to be eaten from? He must be hiding something from us. We wanted to be out of our Father's house and enjoy ourselves without His eye over us. We wanted to enjoy ourselves in the world.

As we read this parable, does it not remind us of people and situations in our lives where this is played out even today? Maybe you are one who sees himself or herself in this story. You, too, had been brought up in the church, by parents who sought to do you good, and yet you have gone out from your upbringing and from the convictions and truths which you know to be the Word of God. You have rebelled against God and against all that you know is true and right. This is the picture of us all. We have gone out from the presence of God to a far country, with no intention of returning. We take the blessings that come to us from the hand of God—our health, material possessions, and other gifts—and we use them to pursue our pleasures in this world. And though you thought to find pleasure, the Word of God says that if you yet remain in your sins, you are not truly happy. You are disappointed every day; you are miserable every day. You can seek to find pleasures in your sins, but they never deliver. They vanish in a moment and they are gone. They only end in bitter disappointment. We taste sin for a moment and Satan tells us it is so pleasing, but immediately it's gone, and we are left guilty. We're enslaved to it. Maybe we try to dig our way out a little bit; we try to work our way back to God. We reform our lives a little. We come to church again, and

we stop doing certain things we know are sinful and start doing things we imagine will please God. We imagine we are now on the mend. We make New Year's resolutions and promises, but we fall short time and again.

What happened to this young man? We read in verse 13, "And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living." You see what this young man did? He took everything, not only what his father gave, but everything he thought was his. He had no intentions of coming back to his father's house. And he went far away, not just down the street. He went to a far country and there he wasted his substance with riotous (or wasteful) living. Foolishly, he spent all that he had been given until he had nothing left to spend. It may be that his elder brother's accusations were true, that he spent his living with harlots. But even if they were exaggerations, we nevertheless read that he lived riotously. Whatever his sin was, we know it was a great sin. There was also the sin of leaving his father's house. He would have cast a stain upon his own name in leaving his father's house. The family would be expected to disown him. When others saw this boy walking, they would say, "There's that one who took all of his father's money and left his family and went on his way foolishly spending his inheritance. What a wicked son he is!"

But something happened. We read that when he had spent all (and here we see the hand of providence), "there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want" (v. 14). He began to be in great need. When he had all his money, he had enough to live on in the world, but now he had nothing left. And notice how gradual this was. He wasted his substance with riotous living, he spent it all, a famine arose, and *then* he came into want. Gradually, he fell deeper and further away from his father. And

that's also true spiritually; it begins many times with a *little* sin, as it were. It became so bad for this boy that he began to be in want and not even his former friends would help him. We read, "and no man gave unto him" (v. 16). All his so-called friends left him. It's likely that they were in need as well, due to the mighty famine in the land. Now he does what anyone would do when in need of something to eat. We read that he seeks out a job and he finds one. We are told that a citizen of that country provided him with a job. Here we see the irony of Jesus's words in the parable when He says, "and he sent him into his fields to feed swine" (v. 15).

In those days it was a common saying among the Jews that it was cursed for a man to raise swine. Pigs were unclean animals. We see to what depths this man has now come. Jesus could have said he fed cattle or some other animal, but Jesus's point is driven home with this word *swine*. He was showing to what depths this man had come. When the people heard this, they would have put this man in the category of the swine, the most unclean, dirty, and filthy animals. This man had come to a very low place. He even grovels in what the swine eat. We read, "He would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat" (v. 16). But even this was not given to him. Isn't this a real picture of sin? Satan promises us much. He tempts us with many things, but he never delivers. He never carries through. You see, to the citizen in this country, his pigs meant more than this man. Listen, you don't mean anything to Satan either. He would rather see your destruction. Satan is not seeking your pleasure. He is not seeking your true happiness. Young people, he is seeking your destruction, and he loves nothing more than to see you take this place by the swine and stay there until you die, or to urge you to despair by staying there. This is where this young man's rebellion led him. Far away from

God, without hope in this world; he was lost. And the worst of it is, up until this point we have read nothing that indicates he even realized it. There he was, working with the swine, wishing he had something to eat. We don't read anything else. He may not have even noticed the decline from his great riches to the place where he had now come. But then we read something marvelous in verse 17: "And when he came to himself." What a wonderful statement in this parable.

### **The Younger Son's Repentance**

This brings us to our second thought. Up until this time, this younger son had been sinking away in sin and it had no effect upon him. He looked, as it were, in a mirror every day and may not have even noticed the changes. Yet the reality was that he was sinking deeper and deeper into sin, farther and farther away from God. And even if there was a momentary conviction that he was losing what he once had, it was brushed away quickly. He may have swept away such thoughts as too pessimistic to think about. Everything will turn out in the end, he told himself. Everything will eventually get better.

What do you do in the face of providential trials and afflictions? This famine was not an accident, but was directed by the hand of God, as are all the events in our lives. Has God used the trials you face to draw out your heart as he did here in this parable, or have you hardened yourself in these afflictions? For this boy, his first step back to the father was coming face to face with the reality of the situation he was in, and facing it honestly. He begins to see his own sin and guilt. The young man began to look at himself. As he did, he may have asked, "Are these pigs going to help me; will any man help me? No, this is all of my own doing and no one can help me. I remember my father's house. It's my own fault that I'm

here. I played the fool. I listened to my own evil heart. I have chosen this way. I have forsaken my father. Unclean pigs, unclean me.” My dear friend, have you ever come to yourself? Have you ever really faced yourself in the light of this Word of God? The Bible doesn’t say you’re getting lost; the Bible says you are lost. You are dead in trespasses and in sins. And what if right now, at this moment, all of your thoughts and all of your actions were written on a piece of paper and printed in a book? Would you like to have your name on it? Look at your hands. What have they done? Look at your eyes. What have you sought after? Look at your mouth. What have you spoken? Think of your thoughts. What have you thought? What has been the constant stream day after day? Don’t shrink back, friend. Face the reality. What are you living on? Are you living on the swine husks of this world and are you satisfied with those? Have you deliberately gone on against your conscience? Do you acknowledge that where you are today is no one else’s doing, that you can only blame yourself? Do you acknowledge that all your decisions and choices have brought you to this place distant from God?

This man had tried to turn to others, but no man gave to him. Perhaps you, too, have turned to others and sought help. You explained what was going on in your life, but they could not help. No man gave you real help. You changed your habits. You started reading your Bible. You started coming more faithfully to church. You spoke to others about your soul’s concerns and your needs. Yet no man gave to you. You can’t help yourself out of the pit you’ve dug. Oh, what a blessed beginning are those words, “And when he was come to himself!” Yet, this was not a place to rest. There are many sinners who have stopped right there. They have come to themselves and have never actually gotten up and returned to the Father’s house. Some of you may be like this young man; you imagine



yourself to be like this son. You know you are a sinner and you need to go back to the Father, but all you do is think about it. You imagine what it would be like. You are like the son here who begins to imagine what he is going to say to his Father when he goes home. Some of you have certain expectations about what coming to Christ looks and feels like, and when it does not go quite the way you imagine, you give up coming. However, I need to tell you that so often, when we do come to ourselves, it goes so entirely differently than what we had expected and what we thought. Many have an idea how they will pray and how they will feel. And so, too, did this young man. He thought he was going to pray in such and such a way, but we will see he didn't even get half of his prayer from his mouth before he arrived home. We must come to the point where we cannot stay in the swine fields but must arise and come to the father. And then it goes in such a different way than what we expected. So it happened with this young man.

He began to consider his father, and how many hired servants his father had. "How many of my father's servants have bread enough, and to spare?" He thinks of all the servants his father has; he is so good to them. They have it so good and look at me, perishing with hunger. This man thinks of his father's heart. It is the father's heart that draws him back home. Let these two thoughts captivate your minds for a moment. Bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger. Those are two thoughts that ought to grip your heart. There is in the Father's house bread enough and to spare for the greatest of sinners, and do you still perish from hunger? There is mercy with God and there is hope beyond your expectation. We begin to see that God has been saving sinners from the beginning of time and is doing so to this very day. He is not hindered in saving whoever comes to Him. If He can

save the murderer of the whole human race, Adam; if He can save David, who in the face of such received love murdered and committed adultery; then He can certainly save me. A hope is stirred in the heart that there is mercy for me in the Father's house, even if I can but be a servant in His house.

This son began to see that being a servant in the father's house was better than dwelling in the tents of wickedness. He began to understand just how wicked leaving his father had been. He had a position of a son and he wasted it away, and now he was worse off than even the servants of his father's house. What does this son do? He thinks to himself, I will arise and go to my father and I will say to him, "Father (notice how differently he uses this term now than when he left home), I have sinned against heaven and before thee and am no more worthy to be called thy son. Father, make me as one of thy hired servants." Not, "Father, give me," but, "Father, make me. Father, make me, draw me, receive me." He shows his great dependence on his father. He acknowledges his sins. "I have sinned against heaven and before thee." He comes to himself. That's repentance.

Have you come to the place where you confess that you are worthy of God's just displeasure? That you are no more worthy to be called His son and thus say, "Could I be as one of Thy hired servants?" And perhaps, there is someone here who is under conviction and says to himself, "I must go home, and I must bend my knees and I must pray." Sinner, don't be so foolish. This prodigal son didn't say, "Tomorrow may be a better day." Perhaps it was raining, and he would console himself that he would do this tomorrow. No, no, no. What do we read? As soon as he had said this, "he arose, and came to his father" (v. 20). Dear friend, have you not considered that your conviction may fade away and you will remain at the swine's trough in a

worse condition than before? God has sent His message to you time and time again, but will you stay where you are and perish in your sins? Don't you realize there is but one heartbeat between you and death? Flee from the wrath to come. You are living on swine husks while the table of plenty is set before you.

But maybe you say, "I have no right to come to Jesus." Isn't this the very argument the young man uses? "I'm not worthy to be called thy son but make me as one of thy hired servants." And furthermore, have you ever sought to come and He has turned you away? Have you ever tried to come, and He said "No" to you? Maybe you say, "But I am not one of those for whom there is mercy to be given." Then I ask you, who has told you so? It is none other but your own wicked heart and the devil himself who would tell you this. Have you heard the Lord say to you, "You are such a wicked son"? Even if such a thought entered the mind of this son, he would not listen. Rather, we read, he arose and came to his father.

Perhaps you say, I need the work of the Holy Spirit. That is truer than even you know. Who is it that gives him the desire to arise and come to his father? It is the Holy Spirit. Who is it that causes him to come to himself? It is the Holy Spirit. But do you think this young man was able to put his finger on it and say, "Now I know this is the work of the Holy Spirit"? No. But having come to himself, having seen his sin that he had sinned against heaven and his father, and that he was no more worthy to be called his son, without another word he arose and came to his father. The prodigal did not linger any longer by sitting on the ground with the swine thinking about it, praying about it. When death was all around him, he came to the only possibility of hope and life his father's house. And he must do so now. He said to himself, "I will arise and go." And he arose and came. He comes to himself in brokenness, and

in a deep sense of his humility, he casts himself on the free grace and mercy of God. I encourage you to be like this son, to turn away from your sins and come to Christ. It is a blessing to hear someone say, “I will arise and go to my father.” But what a greater blessing it is when you actually arise and come. There are many with good intentions, but they never come to Christ. Many have had convictions of the conscience, have remembered an earnest sermon, or have thought of the death of a loved one, but they never come to Jesus. And what happened when he came? We read, “But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him” (v. 20). There’s the answer. That’s the beginning, really, as we will see in our third thought.

### **The Younger Son’s Reception**

We know that the son was in a country at a great distance from home, but it’s amazing what we read in verse 20. Our thoughts have been focused on what was happening with the man in the far-off country, but what was going on at his previous home? We read that when he was yet a great way off—the passage is almost implying that the son had hardly come to himself and got on his feet to come home—the father was leaving to meet him. From a great way off, he sees his son. Isn’t that the drawing love of the Father, already at work, drawing this son home? You see, it’s not the son’s petition that is to have effect with the father. No, the father was already on the lookout for his son. His father saw him, rags and all. He smelled him, pigs and all. What does his father do? He comes running. In those days, for a middle-aged or elderly man to run in public was seen as a disgrace and was frowned upon. But not for this father; his son was coming home. His father saw him, had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck, kissing him. It was not gradually that he would allow his boy to come into the house, after he was all cleaned up and clothed

that he would give him a peck on the cheek. No, no, no. There was immediate reception. There was full forgiveness. There was immediate pardon. That's the wonder of free and sovereign grace. And what happens even before this son has a chance to speak the words he had been contemplating to say? It is his father who sees him, has compassion on him, runs to him, falls on his neck, and kisses him. The word used here implies that he kisses and kisses and kisses him. And that's a picture of our God as He sees returning sinners.

Is this your view of God? If not, you may need to ask yourself if your view of God conforms with the Word or with your own perceptions. We can justify in our minds our view of God, but we cannot avoid this parable and its truth. Sinner, why then are you lingering? Yes, you are lost in yourself, and have so much that testifies against you. But doesn't this young man, also? Doesn't this parable demonstrate to you that God receives sinners, whoever they may be? That He does so, not because of who they are, because of their prayers, or because of anything in them, but because He loves them? Because He sees them, even from all eternity. He has given His Son for them.

Don't be like the Pharisees who thought they had to do something to gain God's favor. They imagined they were good people. They thought if God was going to save anyone, it would be them. And now Jesus speaks about the Father in such a way that they can't even begin to understand and comprehend. You see, when they saw the prodigals, publicans, sinners, and harlots coming to the Father and being received of Him, they were asking, "How can this be? Jesus is wrong. He's a blasphemer." Are these your thoughts of Jesus today?

Not only does the father have compassion on the son, falling on his neck and kissing him, but he does a number of other things as well. He shows this son his love. We

need to be familiar with the culture of that day to understand what the father's actions mean. He dressed his son in the best robe, which was a symbol of status. In the eyes of his father, he was to be arrayed in the most beautiful apparel, in the best robe. "Don't speak to me about being a servant; you are my son." The only words the son was able to say was that he had sinned against heaven and in his sight, and was no more worthy to be called his son. But then the father interrupts him, as it were, and says, "Bring forth the best robe and put it on him." Isn't this signifying the robe of righteousness the believer receives in coming to Jesus so that he can now stand in the presence of the Father? When they placed a ring on the son's hand, it was likely a signet ring by which the father said, "You are my son. I give you authority in my house." A ring on his hand would show unmistakably that this indeed was his son. And the son could look at that ring any day and say, "I have been received back by my father. It is his word of oath and promise to me." And then the father places shoes upon his son's feet. Slaves did not wear shoes or sandals. This was another indication that the son was to be treated as a child of the father, not as a slave.

Finally, the father killed the fatted calf, which was reserved for special guests. The father is saying, "There is no one more important, my son, than you. You have come to yourself, and have come back to me." Do you realize that this is the message of the gospel as well? Who can deliver us from our past? Who can forgive and cleanse our lives of all our rebellion and sin? There is but one. That is the person of Jesus Christ, who has come to this earth and taken upon Himself, as it were, the rags and the odor, and has become cursed of God for the sake of sinners. He clothed Himself, as it were, in sin. He was unjustly condemned and He went the way of the cross to merit eternal life for us. It is as if the Father Himself turned

away from His only beloved Son so that He might run to meet returning sinners. What does this parable say to you today? There is but one way of return to God. The Father looks and He sees returning sinners and runs to meet them even today. He speaks to them His compassionate words of forgiveness. "There is forgiveness with Me," He says, "that I may be feared." The father met this boy and kissed him. What He sets forth in this parable with the younger son is His love, His super-abounding love, from all eternity. Love for a people who have ruined themselves in sin. And yet, He comes and restores them back as sons and as daughters into His presence. Do you know this life of the younger son and have you returned to the Father's house? Amen.