

Security for Seniors

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In thee, O LORD, do I put my trust: let me never be put to confusion. ²Deliver me in thy righteousness, and cause me to escape: incline thine ear unto me, and save me. ³Be thou my strong habitation, whereunto I may continually resort: thou hast given commandment to save me; for thou art my rock and my fortress. ⁴Deliver me, O my God, out of the hand of the wicked, out of the hand of the unrighteous and cruel man. ⁵For thou art my hope, O Lord GOD: thou art my trust from my youth. ⁶By thee have I been holden up from the womb: thou art he that took me out of my mother's bowels: my praise shall be continually of thee. ⁷I am as a wonder unto many; but thou art my strong refuge. ⁸Let my mouth be filled with thy praise and with thy honour all the day. ⁹Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth. ¹⁰For mine enemies speak against me; and they that lay wait for my soul take counsel together, ¹¹saying, God hath forsaken him: persecute and take him; for there is none to deliver him. ¹²O God, be not far from me: O my God, make haste for my help. ¹³Let them be confounded and consumed that are adversaries to my soul; let them be covered with reproach and dishonour that seek my hurt. ¹⁴But I will hope continually, and will yet praise thee more and more. ¹⁵My mouth shall shew forth thy righteousness and thy salvation all the day; for I know not the numbers thereof. ¹⁶I will go in the strength of the Lord GOD: I will make mention of thy righteousness, even of thine only. ¹⁷O God, thou hast taught me from my youth: and hitherto have I declared thy wondrous works. ¹⁸Now also when I am old and greyheaded, O God, forsake

me not; until I have shewed thy strength unto this generation, and thy power to every one that is to come. ¹⁹Thy righteousness also, O God, is very high, who hast done great things: O God, who is like unto thee! ²⁰Thou, which hast shewed me great and sore troubles, shalt quicken me again, and shalt bring me up again from the depths of the earth. ²¹Thou shalt increase my greatness, and comfort me on every side. ²²I will also praise thee with the psaltery, even thy truth, O my God: unto thee will I sing with the harp, O thou Holy One of Israel. ²³My lips shall greatly rejoice when I sing unto thee; and my soul, which thou hast redeemed. ²⁴My tongue also shall talk of thy righteousness all the day long: for they are confounded, for they are brought unto shame, that seek my hurt.

—PSALM 71

This is a sermon for seniors. Now, you might ask, Who are the seniors? As we read the text, you can draw your own conclusions, but these hints should suffice without putting a specific age to being a senior. Just let me say this: seniors always want to qualify when it comes to seniors' discounts but not always to the other things that apply to seniors. Seniors don't want to be called old or gray-headed or weak. But the point is not to define who qualifies as a senior but to speak to those who are approaching the end of their lives. Psalm 71 speaks of those who are old and gray-headed. Psalm 71 gives the sense that a senior is one who speaks to successive generations. Psalm 90:10 speaks of the limits of life as threescore and ten (70) or, by reason of strength, fourscore (80), thus a senior is someone who is approaching or near that number. Even if you're not close to that number, this message can certainly help prepare you for what many call "the golden years." Old age—senior years—comes with a sense of insecurity. The very name "Social Security" implies that for the elderly, there is an inherent sense of financial and provisional insecurity. You no longer have the strength to work and to provide for your spouse and family, unless of course you have a good pension and savings from a lifetime of work. But Social

Security was designed to provide a sense of security and provision for old age. If there is security on a social level, then what security is there for seniors on a spiritual level? That's what we hope to consider from the Word of God. Our theme is "Security for Seniors": (1) A well-grounded security, (2) A much-needed security, and (3) A forward-looking security.

A Well-grounded Security

So, what is this security that aids senior saints for the final leg of their earthly pilgrimage? The psalmist shows us by *professing the Lord's powerful person*. It is security that is grounded in God Himself. Notice what the psalmist says in verse 1, "In thee, O LORD, do I put my trust: let me never be put to confusion." The psalmist invokes the covenant name of God. It is the name of God that speaks of the faithfulness of God. In the psalmist's old age, the God of faithfulness forms the foundation of his spiritual confidence. When confusion of mind threatens to overcome the psalmist in his senior years, he knows that the faithfulness of God will be his confidence. Even as the mind begins to slip and the memory begins to fade, the Lord remains the confidence of saints in their senior years. Is this your confession now, senior saint—"In thee, O LORD, do I put my trust"? Is this your security for your senior years? There is no better place to rest than in the Lord Himself. This is well-grounded security for the senior years.

But there's more. This security is also seen in the *plea for the Lord's gracious preservation*. This plea is seen in verses 2–4, where the psalmist cries out repeatedly for the Lord's deliverance. "Deliver me in thy righteousness, and cause me to escape." An appeal to the righteousness, or justice, of God. "Incline thine ear unto me, and save me." An appeal to the Lord to stretch His ear to the cry of the aged psalmist. "Be thou my strong habitation, whereunto I may continually resort." An appeal for God to be a strong refuge. "Thou hast given commandment to save me; for thou art my rock and my fortress." The security of the Lord's deliverance in the shelter of who God is in old age. In the trembling

years, there is a secure fortress in God for the aged saint. “Deliver me, O my God, out of the hand of the wicked, out of the hand of the unrighteous and cruel man.” An appeal for deliverance from those who practice wickedness. It is an appeal for security and rest in God as a Rock—the Rock of Ages is a Rock for the aged.

This security for seniors is also seen in *the praise of the Lord’s past provision*. The psalmist is looking back on his life. He’s reflecting on how the Lord has cared for him in the past. He says in verse 5, “For thou art my hope, O Lord GOD: thou art my trust from my youth.” From an early age he had learned to place his confidence in God. His security in God began when he was young. That’s an important lesson for young people as well. Place your confidence in God when you are young—not in yourself—so that when you are old, that confidence can remain unshaken. The psalmist further reflects in verse 6, “By thee have I been holden up from the womb.” He sees God’s providential care from the moment of birth and beyond. This forms the subject of his praise in verses 7–8. His well-grounded hope for deliverance and help in the time of old age comes from reflection on who God has been for him in the past.

So, too, for the aged among us. Here’s God’s instruction for you in the time of old age. Don’t grow bitter because of pain but let the sweetness and strength of who God is sustain you and ground your hope for final deliverance. Resolve to make God your strong tower and refuge. Reflect on His goodness to you from the moment of your first breaths and praise Him for it.

A Much-needed Security

And when do you need security? In times of vulnerability and weakness. Seniors face this in a special way. The time of old age is a time of *physical weakness* in which security is needed. This physical weakness is captured by the psalmist as he writes in verse 9, “Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth.” Senior years are times of vulnerability—the feelings of no longer being able to work as before. The body weakens, and the

mind slips. Feelings of uselessness set in. Society kicks the elderly to the curb as if they have nothing more to contribute. The fears of abandonment as the psalmist cries out, “Cast me not off.” Forsake me not when my strength fails. When a once-strong, robust body breaks down and can’t do what it used to, there is a searching for security outside of ourselves. When our joints need to be replaced and surgeries loom to fix a worn-out body, we search for security. Where is lasting and ultimate security found? Not in canes and walkers. Not in surgeries and rehabilitations. The psalmist finds it in God, and hence he cries out in the midst of his weakness and vulnerability, “Cast me not off in the time of old age, and forsake me not when my strength faileth.”

My aged friend, where does your physical weakness bring you? Does it bring you to this point where you realize more and more that security lies not within your strength, a strength that you perhaps relied on before? But now as the body breaks down, you realize that you can’t rely on your own strength? You relied on your spouse, but if your spouse is gone, you have no one. Where do you turn in physical weakness and vulnerability of old age? There is much-needed security to be found in the Lord.

In time of spiritual temptation, the elderly need spiritual security. Perhaps some of us think that the time of old age is a time where temptations are silent. The elderly saint should be much more advanced in the areas of battling temptations, no? Well, according to the psalmist and most elderly saints, this is not the case. Temptations are not quiet in old age. The temptations may be different than they were in younger years, but they are still temptations: temptations to fear God’s abandonment, temptation to give in to the enemies of the soul that are perhaps more active in old age to deprive the aging saint of spiritual comfort. Listen to how David describes these temptations. “For mine enemies speak against me; and they that lay wait for my soul take counsel together, saying, God hath forsaken him: persecute and take him; for there is none to deliver him. O God, be not far from me: O my God, make haste for my help. Let them be confounded and

consumed that are adversaries to my soul; let them be covered with reproach and dishonor that seek my hurt” (vv. 10–13).

The spiritual enemies, fears, and doubts of the aged saint are real, aren't they? Reflecting on a life past and the sins of youth come back to haunt you as the tempter comes to shake and sift you. Times of intense loneliness as you mourn the loss of a spouse and busy children, and the temptation is to give in to the temptation and fear that God has abandoned you. All you have is time as you sit and reflect on days gone by and you face days of pain, sorrow, sickness, loneliness. Surely old age with its temptations is a time for much-needed security in the Lord and His deliverance.

But as David cries out to God for help, notice how this much-needed security finds its entrance into his heart as he commits himself to praise God. He has learned to look beyond his circumstances and the enemies of his soul, to look to God for security. He says in verse 14, “But I will hope continually, and will yet praise thee more and more.” His security lies beyond himself. He says, I will hope continually. Despite the physical weakness and the spiritual temptations, his hope is grounded continually in God. That's where he turns in time of trouble. He finds his much-needed security in God. His spiritual conflict leads to spiritual confession and confidence. It is a much-needed security but certainly not out of reach, as David's experience shows here. Indeed, the old man who writes this psalm moves from pain to praise.

Is this your confession in old age, my friend? I will hope in God continually. That's where my security is found. During pain, I will praise Him because I know He is holding me even during the most difficult period of my life. I know He will hold me when my strength fails. He is my confidence when I face the enemies of my soul and they taunt me with death and seek to rob me of spiritual comfort. And even if you are not aged, these verses tell you where to be right now before you reach old age. You need God as your confidence now. Don't delay until senior years, but learn this now.

A Forward-looking Security

What does this security do for seniors? It makes you productive in your senior years. It makes you forward-looking in your senior years. Reflecting on God's faithfulness in past years is helpful in grounding your security in God for the present. But reflecting on God's faithfulness and your spiritual security in Him also enables you to live for the Lord in your senior years. That's what we see in the last verses of this psalm. David looks forward. He is secure in God. He can face the last years of his life with confidence even during pains and problems of aging. His forward-looking security enables him to do three things.

It enables him *to magnify God for the next generation*. There is evident concern that others know about God, as we read in verse 15, "My mouth shall shew forth thy righteousness and thy salvation all the day; for I know not the numbers thereof." The desire of this aged saint is to publish the good news of salvation. He has experienced this through all his days. He wants others to know the immeasurable salvation of God. He wants others to know of the righteousness of God, that which is life to those who believe. He continues in verse 16, "I will go in the strength of the Lord GOD: I will make mention of thy righteousness, even of thine only." His daily strength is not his own, but God's. This strength will fuel his proclamation of God's righteousness. He has been taught by God in verse 17, and as he has been taught by God in his youth, so he wants the next generation of youth to know about God. Listen to what he says in verse 18. "Now also when I am old and grayheaded, O God, forsake me not; until I have shewed thy strength unto this generation, and thy power to every one that is to come." He wants to magnify God to the generations that follow him. This is his desire, as he says in verse 19, "Thy righteousness also, O God, is very high, who hast done great things: O God, who is like unto thee!" As he looks forward, the power, strength, and righteousness of God are the subjects dear to his heart and on his lips, overflowing to the next generation.

So often, old age can seem so unproductive. You can't do much anymore. But if you have your faculties about you, you can pray and you can speak of God's power, strength, and righteousness to the next generation. If you have been taught, then you need to be a teacher to the following generations. The faithfulness, power, strength, and righteousness of God are the best topics to share with younger generations. When these things are combined with your own personal narrative of how these things form your eternal security, they present a compelling gospel testimony that shapes younger lives. Are you speaking, aged saint? Are you listening, younger generations?

It enables him *to hope in God for the general resurrection*. And as the aged saint finds security in God, it enables him to look beyond this life even. Consider what is written in verse 20. "Thou, which hast shewed me great and sore troubles, shalt quicken me again, and shalt bring me up again from the depths of the earth." This puts all this aging trouble in perspective. The same God of providence who brought these troubles into his life will also bring him out of those troubles in the final act of deliverance in the resurrection from the dead. There is the promise of life that the aged saint takes hold of here in these words, "Thou shalt quicken me again." It is not the fount of youth that so many chase. No, it is eternal life in glory, resurrected body and soul. The body that is decaying and decrepit will rise again from the depths of the earth. Death will not have the final say for the aged saint. Here's hope and comfort and security for seniors. In fact, this is the hope of all the saints, no matter what your age is. But particularly for aged saints, this comfort is priceless. God will finally and fully deliver in the resurrection. There is life beyond the grave.

It enables him *to praise God for His wonderful deliverance*. In light of this resurrection hope and security, the aged saint has every reason to praise God. It is not age that defines our praise. It is not physical capacity that defines our praise. It is not wrinkled skin or gray hair that defines our praise. It is not the trembling hand or the pain-wracked limbs that define our praise. No, it is

God who defines our praise at every stage of life. But it is notable that the aged saint here praises God for his comfort, for his truth, for his holiness, for his deliverance. We read of this in verses 21–24. “Thou shalt increase my greatness, and comfort me on every side. I will also praise thee with the psaltery, even thy truth, O my God: unto thee will I sing with the harp, O thou Holy One of Israel. My lips shall greatly rejoice when I sing unto thee; and my soul, which thou hast redeemed. My tongue also shall talk of thy righteousness all the day long: for they are confounded, for they are brought unto shame, that seek my hurt.” How will you be found in old age? Will you find security in God, even in the heart of old age, and sing His praises, looking ahead to final deliverance? He is the security for seniors.

Amen.

God's Holiness

Dr. Joel R. Beeke

Isaiah 6

The greatest need of the church today is an encounter with the holiness of God. Proverbs 9:10 says, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy [One] is understanding.” A cold, dispassionate analysis of God’s holiness might fascinate our minds, but it won’t benefit our souls unless our study of God is done in the pursuit of our personal and saving knowledge of Him in His holiness. What we desperately need is not only a renewed understanding of His holiness but an actual *reckoning* with Him in the majesty, purity, and grace of His holiness.

The various dimensions of God’s holiness are recognized by many theologians. A. A. Hodge said, “The holiness of God is not to be conceived of as one attribute among others; it is rather a general term representing the conception of his consummate perfection and total glory.” Thus, Hodge said, the Scriptures speak of God’s holiness as “his transcendently august and venerable majesty” and his “moral purity.”¹ This accords with the biblical testimony, which portrays God’s holiness as His transcendence as well as His moral perfection.

Both of these aspects can be seen in Isaiah 6. Using this passage as our textual guide, let’s peer into the prophet’s encounter with the holiness of God in its majesty, purity, and grace:

1. God’s majestic holiness
2. God’s moral holiness
3. God’s gracious holiness

1. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 163.

God's Majestic Holiness

The climactic Old Testament revelation of God's holiness appears in Isaiah's vision. Isaiah 6:1-3 reads, "In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: The whole earth is full of his glory."

Isaiah saw the Lord on an exalted throne, transcendent in regal majesty. He reigns supreme over the affairs of men and is worshiped by the hosts of heaven. The emphasis of Isaiah's vision falls upon God's sovereignty and greatness. Note the titles used of God in verses 1, 3, and 5: "the Lord," "the LORD (*YHWH*) of hosts," and "the King." In verse 1, where Isaiah says, "I saw the Lord," the Hebrew title is *Adonai*, which means Ruler, Master, Sovereign, Exalted One. The vision vividly depicts God's supremacy over angelic powers and earthly kings. The greatest of men still die, but the Lord remains forever; "thy throne from generation to generation" (Lam. 5:19). Thomas Goodwin said, "He is separate and alone in his holiness, as he is alone in his being.... Now of all that could have been said or attributed to him, this sets up God the highest, and as most sovereign. And this, of all others, layeth us low, both as we are creatures and as we are sinners," for God's holiness "separates him from the creatures."² In other words, the holiness of God exalts Him without equal and casts down human pride into the dust.

Holiness is the peculiar glory of His divine nature. Edward Leigh said that God's essential holiness "is the incommunicable eminency of the divine Majesty, exalted above all."³ Herman Bavinck wrote, "He is rather called holy in a comprehensive sense

2. Goodwin, *Of the Creatures, and the Condition of Their State by Creation*, in *Works*, 7:15.

3. Leigh, *A Treatise of Divinity*, 2:102.

in connection with every revelation that impresses humans with his deity.”⁴ R. C. Sproul wrote that God’s holiness “signifies everything about God that sets Him apart from us and makes Him an object of awe, adoration, and dread to us.”⁵

God’s holiness reminds us that His difference from us is not merely quantitative, as if God were better than we are just because He has a longer list of things He knows, actions He can do, and places where He is present. It is not simply that He is ‘more holy’ than His saints, but that He is qualitatively different from us. He is in a category by Himself (*sui generis*). In Revelation 15:4, the sinless saints sing, “Thou only art holy.” God’s holiness, as Goodwin noted, implies that we should never treat God as if He were first on a list of beings, but, as the Holy One, He is *unicus*, the Only One who “stands apart by himself” from all our categories.⁶ Another writer put it well when he said, “There is a terrifying unfamiliarity in the things that God says about Himself.”⁷

The seraphim cover themselves in God’s presence, crying out “holy, holy, holy,” thus ascribing to God a holiness that even they fall short of—not because they have sinned, but because even sinless, immortal spirits are overwhelmed by God’s holiness and unapproachable light. Stephen Charnock said,

Holiness is the substance of God, but a quality and accident in a creature. God is infinitely holy, creatures finitely holy. He is holy from himself, creatures are holy by derivation from him. . . . Though God hath crowned the angels with an unspotted sanctity, and placed them in a habitation of glory, yet as illustrious as they are, they have an unworthiness in their own nature to appear before the throne of so holy a God. Their holiness grows dim and pale in his presence; it is but a weak shadow of that divine parity, whose light is so glorious that it makes them cover

4. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:220.

5. *The Reformation Study Bible*, ed. R. C. Sproul (Orlando: Ligonier Ministries, 2005), 168.

6. Goodwin, *Of the Creatures*, in *Works*, 7:20.

7. Macleod, *Behold Your God*, 108.

their faces out of weakness to behold it, and cover their feet out of shame in themselves.⁸

The Scriptures hail the holiness of God as His crowning attribute. Thomas Watson said, “Holiness is the most sparkling jewel of [God’s] diadem.”⁹ Yes, God is love, and He is just, wise, and good, and every attribute He possesses is one with His nature, identical and co-extensive with His entire being, consubstantial within the simplicity of the divine essence. But it’s especially God’s holiness that radiates through all His attributes and makes each one shine with a peculiar splendor. John Gill noted, “It has been thought to be not so much a particular and distinct attribute of itself, as the lustre, glory, and harmony of all the rest; and this is what is called ‘the beauty of the Lord’ (Ps. 27:4).”¹⁰

God’s glory is the outshining, the brilliant display, of His holiness.¹¹ Just think of the most beautiful thing you could imagine. What would it be? Majestic mountains, a renaissance painting, a symphony by Bach, a Caribbean sunset over crystal blue waters? Well, compared to the beauty of divine holiness, all those things are profane and base. The most ravishing things on earth are but faint reflections or dull images of God’s beautiful holiness which shines in inapproachable, radiant splendor. We were made to contemplate this glory, and, as Augustine said, our hearts will be restless until they find their rest in beholding Him in His superlative, soul-satisfying beauty.

8. Stephen Charnock, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock* (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: James Nichol; James Nisbet and Co.; W. Robertson; G. Herbert, 1864–1866), 2:195–196.

9. Thomas Watson, *Puritan Gems; Or, Wise and Holy Sayings of the Rev. Thomas Watson, A.M.*, ed. John Adey, Second Thousand. (London: J. Snow, and Ward and Co.; Nisbet and Co.; E. F. Gooch, 1850), 66.

10. Gill, *Body of Divinity*, 104.

11. “His glory (*câbod*) is His manifested holiness...just as, on the other hand, His holiness is His veiled or hidden glory.” Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 7 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996), 125.

All throughout the Scriptures, holiness correlates with both glory and beauty. The psalmist declared, “Honour and majesty are before him: strength and beauty are in his sanctuary [Holy Place]” (Ps. 96:6). David thirsted “to see thy power and thy glory, so as I have seen thee in the sanctuary” (Ps. 63:2). The “one thing” he desired of God was to dwell in His temple “to behold the beauty of the Lord” (Ps. 27:4). And Isaiah promised, “Thine eyes shall see the king in his beauty” (Isa. 33:17). When we view the holiness of God in His “brilliant splendor,” we feel compelled to cover our faces, as it were, crying out, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts!” Seeing His beauty causes us to be irresistibly attracted to holiness so that we desire, above all, to reflect His image “in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:24).¹²

It has been said by many a theologian that the highest task of theology is the contemplation of God—to gaze upon Him through His own self-revelation in the Scriptures and to be beautified by this contemplation. A true view of God ushers us beyond the speculative into the transformative, because the true knowledge of God brings us into encounter with His holy presence through the atoning blood of Christ. As His holiness shines into our hearts through the Word, it illuminates us, humbles us, convicts us, enlivens us, purifies us, and beautifies our souls. Are you, dear believer, being beautified continually by beholding the beauty of God’s holiness in the Scriptures? There is no substitute for this. Secondhand knowledge of God will not suffice. You must know and encounter the triune God as “the Holy One,” or else you must perish from His presence as an unholy thing.

Holiness demands our worship of God and is central to it. God’s holiness stirs “awe and dread,” but at the same time His people are “fascinated” and “entranced” by the Holy One.¹³ The seraphim in Isaiah’s vision both covered their faces and sang God’s

12. Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, 1:135.

13. Reymond, *What Is God?*, 183–84. Reymond summarized the thesis of Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 12–40.

praises, evidencing *dread and delight*. A high view of God leads to a high esteem for worship. If we lose sight of God's holiness, we will lose fervor and fear in our worship. Joseph Pipa says, "We worship Him because of who He is.... One of the reasons, therefore, our worship totters on the edge of irrelevance is because we do not come into God's presence aware of who He is."¹⁴ Jeremiah Burroughs (c. 1600–1646) wrote, "The great reason why people come and worship God in a slight way is because they do not see God in His glory."¹⁵ On the other hand, when we encounter God in His holiness, it either propels us into glad worship or threatens to destroy us for dishonoring His holy name.

Let us, therefore, give our fervent, heart-felt worship to our triune God. When we adore Him, earth offers up a faint echo of heaven's thunder. The seraphim Isaiah speaks of are angelic creatures created for worship. The title seraph in the Hebrew literally means "burning one"—lit aflame with the fire of God. Psalm 104:4 says God makes His angels "a flaming fire." They burn with holy fire, burning with zeal to worship God in the splendor of His holiness. Their entire being is lit ablaze and taken up with the act of worship, purest worship. And if we get a glimpse, just a small glimpse, of the greatness of our God, we will find that we too are impelled to worship Him with all our mind, heart, strength, and soul. Our apathetic prayers, half-hearted devotions, sluggishness in service, irreverence in worship, will be transformed into fervent activities set ablaze by the fire of God's holiness, radiating with reverent delight that beautifies all that we do in the service of the King.

God's Moral Holiness

That God is holy has massive moral implications, beginning with the righteous character of God Himself and reaching to the moral

14. Joseph Pipa, *The Worship of God* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2005), 63, 65.

15. Jeremiah Burroughs, *Gospel Worship* (Orlando: Soli Deo Gloria, 1990), 86.

character and conduct of all angels and men. The holiness of God is somewhat like the sun. Its massive presence exerts pervasive force so that all things within the solar system must revolve around its brilliant glory. However, God's presence is infinitely more pervasive. Nothing in creation lies beyond or outside of the influence of His holiness. God's holiness in its moral dimensions can be best appreciated if we consider its relationship to three things.

First, consider its relationship to God's glory. The Lord's holiness entails His purpose to glorify Himself in all that He does, for He alone is the glorious God. If He is supremely sacred, then He must honor Himself as such and require others to do the same, or He would deny Himself. The angels cried, "Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa. 6:3). Goodwin concluded, "Holiness is that whereby God aims at his own glory."¹⁶ James Ussher said that God's holiness means that "he most justly loveth, liketh, and preferreth himself above all."¹⁷ Leigh wrote, "God's holiness is that excellency of his nature, by which he gives himself (as I may say) unto himself, doing all for himself, and in all, and by all, and above all, aiming at his own pleasure and glory."¹⁸ The Lord commands us to love Him with all our hearts, all our souls, and all our strength (Deut. 6:5), but God alone is able to love Himself with an infinite love, and thus He alone is infinitely holy.¹⁹

Therefore, we may speak of God's moral holiness not as a separate attribute from God's majestic holiness but as another dimension of the one divine holiness. This is the aspect of God's holiness that the Christian tradition has emphasized historically: holiness as the virtue or perfection of God's nature.²⁰ Holiness is defined more narrowly as God's moral purity and settled opposi-

16. Goodwin, *Of the Creatures*, in *Works*, 7:15.

17. Ussher, *A Body of Divinity*, 3rd head (52).

18. Leigh, *A Treatise of Divinity*, 2:102.

19. Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 2:115, 117.

20. Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 1.4.63 (87); Polyander, Walaëus, Thy-sius, and Rivetus, *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, 6.39 (1:177).

tion to all impurity.²¹ He is the “Holy One” who is “of purer eyes than to behold evil” and cannot “look on iniquity” with approval and pleasure (Hab. 1:12–13).

In the moral realm, too, God's holiness denotes His separation and supremacy. The moral holiness of God is the absolute righteousness of His whole nature. It sanctifies all that God does and puts divine glory in all His works. Without holiness, God would be a terror to us. Leigh said, “Holiness is the beauty of all God's attributes, without which his wisdom would be but subtlety, his justice cruelty, his sovereignty tyranny, his mercy foolish pity.”²² With holiness, however, all of God's attributes shine with amazing loveliness.

Second, consider God's moral holiness in relationship to our sin. Isaiah understood this truth with painful clarity. The divine vision broke him and threatened to destroy him. In verse 5, he recalls his sinfulness and the sinfulness of the people he is associated with: “I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.” We swim in sin like fish swim in water. But when Isaiah was taken up into the atmosphere of heaven, he was like a fish out of water. The sights were terrifying, the sounds were sublime, the very air was dense with the luminescent smoke of the divine presence.

But why did he confess this about his *lips*? Why does he confess the impurity of his lips of all things? It's because of the praises of the seraphim. Isaiah's unclean lips stand in contrast to the purity and power of the praises of the heavenly hosts. Their worship was untainted and unhindered by sin, and they could not cease to praise God nonstop, so overwhelmed were they at the sight of His glory. So thunderous was their praise that the very posts of the door were shaken by the reverberation of the sound (v. 4). And that shook and jolted Isaiah to the core of his being.

21. Polyander, Walaeus, Thysius, and Rivetus, *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae*, 6.40 (1:179); Leigh, *A Treatise of Divinity*, 2:102.

22. Leigh, *A Treatise of Divinity*, 2:104.

Isaiah recognized that he, in comparison, had little regard for God. He had never praised Him as He ought. The weight of God's holy glory so penetrated his being that it *constrained* praise from him, but he could not praise because he was so overcome with a sense of his unworthiness. He saw himself as unworthy to even speak a word to God's praise, so the only recourse left in the light of such weighty, overwhelming glory was *simply to die!* So he cries out, "Woe is me!"

And notice what he confesses; not just his profane speech, not just the words that he did and did not say, but the *lips* that make utterance. And he traces the sin of his speech to its root in his being. "I am a *man* of unclean lips"—a *man* of profane speech. He's saying, "My person, my humanity, is characterized by inherent taintedness and fallenness and corruption. My sinful actions by sinful words betray my sinful nature, revealing the plague of my own heart."

This all seems so awful, so awesome, so dreadful! It reminds us of Isaiah 8:13, where the prophet said, "Sanctify the LORD of hosts himself; and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread." But this is precisely what proximity to God will necessarily elicit from sinners. And this is how a genuine work of grace normally functions in its beginnings. In the beginning of the creation God said, "Let there be light: and there was light" (Gen. 1:3). And when God begins to make us a new creation by grace, the first thing He does is say, Let there be light in their hearts. He shines the light of His holiness into our hearts to awaken us to the knowledge of Himself and the knowledge of ourselves, and He bombards our understanding with a sense of His holiness.

When the conviction of the Spirit works in the heart of a sinner, the conscience is awakened from its slumber and sins come to mind and come to light. As Moses said, "Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance" (Ps. 90:8). Sins that we once saw as small become grave transgressions. Little peccadillos become monstrous atrocities in the light of God's infinite holiness and worthiness. We say with David in the fifty-first

psalm, "I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me" (v. 3). We cease to justify and rationalize our sin, and instead we confess it, we abhor it, we forsake it, if only we can get its burden off our conscience. We cry out for "truth in the inward parts" (Ps. 51:6). The gravity of our transgressions becomes commensurate with our sense of the enormity of God's holiness and glory.

So we should ask ourselves: Do I know anything of this humbling work of the Spirit? Have I ever caught a glimpse of God's holy glory? Has my heart ever been pierced and cut asunder by His penetrating purity? I'm not just talking about the disturbings of natural conscience but the piercings of the Spirit's sword into the very joints and marrow, to expose the thoughts and intentions of the heart in all their impurity in the light of God's holiness. And if you have experienced this, then the question is: what did you do with it? Because conviction alone is not salvation or sanctification. God convicts us to lead us to a recognition of our guilt and misery, so that we would hunger and thirst for His righteousness, so that we would long for His grace and goodness in salvation and set our hearts on seeking Him (see Matt. 5:6).

Third, consider the relationship between God's moral holiness and our holiness. The moral excellence of God's holiness blazes forth in His law, which itself is "holy, and just, and good" (Rom. 7:12). God's perfection is the standard for our moral character and one of our most important motivations for our religious practice. God's entire moral code flows out of His holiness. Human holiness is whole-minded and wholehearted obedience to God's law. The "law of the LORD of hosts" is "the word of the Holy One of Israel," so we must not despise it (Isa. 5:24). Therefore, Christians must live "as obedient children" who do their Father's will, heeding the call, "Be ye holy; for I am holy" (1 Pet. 1:14-16, citing Lev. 11:45; 19:2). Watson said that our holiness consists "in our suitableness to God's nature, and in our subjection to his will."²³

23. Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, 85.

Personal holiness is possible only because God's "holy calling" has powerfully gripped us, "not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began" (2 Tim. 1:9). God is saving his chosen ones "through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth" (2 Thess. 2:13). The Father loves His children and wisely disciplines us through painful trials "that we might be partakers of his holiness," that is, have "the peaceable fruit of righteousness" (Heb. 12:10–11). We must pursue holiness because without it no one will see the Lord (v. 14).

J. C. Ryle describes "what true practical holiness is": "Holiness is the habit of being of one mind with God...hating what He hates—loving what He loves—and measuring everything in this world by the standard of His Word." A holy person will "endeavour to shun every known sin, and to keep every known commandment." He will "strive to be like our Lord Jesus Christ." He will pursue meekness, patience, gentleness, self-control in word and deed, self-denial, love, kindness, mercy, purity of heart, fear of God, humility, and faithfulness in all his responsibilities. A holy person "will endeavour to set his affections entirely on things above, and to hold things on earth with a very loose hand."²⁴ This is the character of the holy Lord Jesus, and it will increasingly become the character of all united to Him by a living faith, especially as they follow Him, growing in conformity to Him by diligence and suffering under God's gracious hand.

It is well to remember that, unlike our justification, our sanctification in this life is always a work in progress and never complete, since, as the Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 114–15) says, "Even the holiest men, while in this life, have only a small beginning of this obedience; yet so, that with a sincere resolution they begin to live, not only according to some, but all the commandments of God." Yet this small beginning gives us hope that we shall

24. J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 1956), 34–38.

“arrive at the perfection proposed to us in a life to come,” through Jesus Christ.²⁵ And thanks be to God that in Christ He has made provision for us to become by grace what we are not by nature.

God's Gracious Holiness

The moral excellence of God's holiness appears both in His judgments and His acts of grace and mercy. Rev. G. H. Kersten said, “The attribute of God's holiness is a terror to the wicked, to whom He is a devouring fire and everlasting burning, so that the wicked shall not dwell with Him. On the other hand it is a source of comfort and salvation for those who fear Him, and out of love to His perfection, seek to flee from sin, and to perfect their holiness in the fear of God.”²⁶

Grace is an important aspect of divine holiness for Christ's sake. The Lord said, “For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones” (Isa. 57:15). This is the wonder of holiness: it both exalts God infinitely above all creation in eternal transcendence and brings Him near to those broken over their sins so that He tenderly renews them. God's very holiness is the reason why He will not destroy His covenant people but will redeem them (Isa. 41:14; Hos. 11:9).²⁷

In Isaiah 6:6–7, we read, “Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: and he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged.” Upon beholding the sovereign majesty and glorious holiness of God, and upon being penetrated to the core of his being with the light of God's purity, and crying out in

25. *The Three Forms of Unity*, 109.

26. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:86.

27. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 29.

abhorrence of sin, Isaiah receives three wonderful and astonishing *gracious* blessings.

The first is the pardon of his sin. “Thine iniquity is taken away.” It’s gone! Removed! This was free forgiveness by the sheer mercy and grace of God. Isaiah did not merit it, and he certainly didn’t deserve it. He didn’t try to bribe God or coerce God’s favor through self-concocted works of righteousness. He didn’t promise to make amends; he didn’t make a vow that he would try to do better in the future. He simply *confessed* and *received*. He deprecated himself and his sin and he had nowhere else to look but to God’s pure grace. When you see God’s holiness for what it is, you realize that all your works are as “filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6). You realize that you have the sentence of death in yourself, and you realize that your only hope is in the God who pardons by His sovereign mercy alone (see Rom. 9:15).

But the meaning of the text goes deeper than that. Because when the seraph says to him, “Thy sin [is] purged,” the Hebrew word that is used here, in the passive voice, can literally be rendered, “atoned for.”²⁸ The word is associated with blood atonement in Numbers 35:33. You may be familiar with Leviticus 16, which speaks of the Day of Atonement. The Jews have a name for this even to this day. They call it Yom Kippur, the Day (*yom*) of Atonement (*kippur*). Our text has that same word in its verbal form. It’s saying, Your sin is *atoned for*!

Now if we know anything about how atonement and pardon works, we know that the Bible teaches that the atonement for the life or soul of the sinner can only be accomplished through the shedding of blood. Leviticus 17:11 says, “For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul.” But where is the blood in Isaiah’s vision?

28. William Lee Holladay and Ludwig Köhler, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 163.

The answer is in the symbolism of the burning coal. This was a coal from the altar of burnt offering. In the outer court of the temple, there was a bronze altar. And upon that altar, the priests of Israel would burn the animals that they had previously killed by the letting out of their blood. So, the altar burned with fire day and night; it was to never go out, symbolizing the blazing purity of the Lord, whose holiness is as all-consuming fire (Deut. 4:24). The animals, after shedding their blood, would be burnt on this altar to make atonement every day. The fire of judgment would consume the victims as substitutes for the people, and the people would receive God's blessing and not be consumed with the fire of His wrath. The burning coal in Isaiah's vision is a prophetic symbol—it bears the symbolism and significance of the altar on which atonement was made. Alec Motyer comments, "The live coal thus encapsulates the ideas of atonement, propitiation, satisfaction, forgiveness, cleansing and reconciliation."²⁹ So when the coal is touched to his lips, it's understood that all of this redemptive significance comes with it.

Isaiah's atonement ultimately did not come from the earthly temple altar, however, but from the heavenly altar in the heavenly temple. In his vision, he is seeing the archetypal temple in glory that the book of Hebrews talks about (chs. 8–9). The temple on earth was but a picture of heavenly reality. It bore sacramental, symbolic significance of eternal salvation truths. And the book of Hebrews tells us that the heavenly temple is all about Jesus Christ and His work of redemption. So, Isaiah's sin was atoned for ultimately by the One he wrote about—by the Suffering Servant led as a lamb to the slaughter, who was crushed for Isaiah's iniquities on the cross (Isa. 53). Jesus Christ was consumed with the fire of God's fury and He went through Hell on the cross to save us from the all-consuming fire of God's blazing holiness in eternity.

29. J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 20, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1999), 82.

When Christ was forsaken by God upon the cross for our sins, He was especially conscious of God's holiness. In Psalm 22, which He quoted on the cross, after crying out "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" the psalm follows that with the declaration, "But thou art holy" (v. 3). The eyes of the Holy One cannot look with favor upon iniquity (Hab. 1:12–13). Thomas Boston said, "There is nothing wherein the divine holiness and hatred of sin is so manifest as in the sufferings of his own dear Son. This was a greater demonstration thereof than if all men and angels had suffered for it eternally in hell-fire."³⁰ Yet it was precisely God's holiness that evoked Christ's trust that God would faithfully save Him and all His people (Ps. 22:3–5). Christ's death satisfied God's holiness, for on the cross He "sanctified" (*hagiazō*) His people (Heb. 10:10, 14; 13:12). From beginning to end, Christ's obedient sufferings were engraved, as it were, with the words engraved on the golden plate of the high priest, "Holiness unto the Lord."

The second thing Isaiah received was cleansing, purging, purification. The coal symbolized the atonement made on the altar, but it was also a "live" coal, a *burning* coal. Fire purifies, and this symbolized the cleansing effect of God's grace in application. Isaiah 4:4 talks about purging away the filth of the daughters of Zion "by the spirit of judgment, and by the spirit of burning." In salvation, the Holy Spirit comes like a purifying fire of judgment upon our sin, purging our pollution and sanctifying us by the communication of His holiness to us so that we would live in holiness unto Him.

And that's how salvation works, dear friends. It brings pardon and purification, justification and sanctification, forgiveness and cleansing. There is no forgiveness of sin without also experiencing cleansing from it. We cannot remain filthy and unclean as a people of unclean lips. God sanctifies our lips to His praise. He sanctifies our hearts to His devotion. He sanctifies our hands to His service. So, the proof that you've been justified is that you are being

30. Boston, *An Illustration of the Doctrines of the Christian Religion*, in *Works*, 1:102–3.

sanctified. Without evidence of sanctification in our lives, there is no reliable way to prove that we have been justified. To receive the benefits of Christ's justifying work is inseparable from receiving the grace of the Spirit's sanctifying influence.

God's moral and gracious holiness pervades the Trinity revealed in the gospel. Jesus Christ is "the Holy One and the Just" (Acts 3:14), who perfectly fulfilled God's law and deserved no punishment. We may trust Him entirely, for He is holy and true (Rev. 3:7). The name "Holy Spirit" sets the third person of the Trinity apart from every unclean spirit (Mark 3:29-30) and distinguishes Him as the divine agent to sanctify those people in whom He dwells so that they live for God's glory (1 Cor. 6:19-20). The gospel is a message of the triune God's holiness: holiness in judging sinners, holiness in redeeming sinners, and holiness in sanctifying sinners. How sweet, then, is the holiness of God when we encounter it through faith in Christ!

Finally, the third thing Isaiah received is the assurance of pardon. The seraph assures him that his "iniquity is taken away." He assures him of pardon and peace with God. God made Isaiah to know the joy of His salvation. The dread and despair left, and peace and assurance flooded his soul with a sense of relief. Gratitude for such a great salvation animated his resolve to offer himself as his Lord's servant. So Isaiah cried out, "Here I am! Send me!" When we realize how great and glorious salvation is, our gratitude moves us to offer ourselves as living sacrifices for the sake of His cause. When we see the holiness of God, not in despair but in faith, it fills us with zeal to join our song with the seraphim and to pray, "May the whole earth be full of Thy glory, Lord! I long to see that day, and I'll do whatever I can to hasten that reality!"

In Christ, the searing holiness of God has become our salvation. Though God remains a "consuming fire" who requires our "reverence and godly fear" (Heb. 12:28-29), by faith we may boldly "enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus" (Heb. 10:19). The God who sent Christ to give eternal life to sinners is the "holy Father" (John 17:11). God's holiness guarantees His sworn promise that the

kingdom of Christ, the Son of David, will not fail (Ps. 89:33–35). In swearing by His holiness, God has sworn by Himself, and He would cease to be God if He did not completely save those “who have fled for refuge” to this Great High Priest (Heb. 6:13–20). In Jesus Christ, Christians can fulfill Psalm 99:5. “Exalt ye the Lord our God, and worship at his footstool; for he is holy.” Yet their freedom to approach God’s holy presence does not make Him any less holy, “for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee” (Isa. 12:6).

Dear friends, Isaiah’s encounter with the Holy One was a paradigm for what God wanted the nation of Judah to experience. And it’s a paradigm for what He wants us all to experience as well—not through direct prophetic revelation, but through the illumination and application of the Spirit as we’re exposed to the holiness of God in the Holy Scriptures.

Conclusion

The right human response to God’s holiness is the fear of God. He is “glorious in holiness, fearful in praises” (Ex. 15:11). David prayed, “In thy fear will I worship toward thy holy temple” (Ps. 5:7). God’s Word aims to move people to “fear this glorious and fearful name, THE LORD THY GOD” (Deut. 28:58), for “holy and reverend [fearsome] is his name” (Ps. 111:9). This fear arises not merely from a dread of God’s holy judgment but from an experience of God’s holy salvation. The Lord said that when He restored Israel, “they shall sanctify my name, and sanctify the Holy One of Jacob, and shall fear the God of Israel” (Isa. 29:23). Bavinck said, “To sanctify him is to fear him.”³¹

Sinful fear of God drives people away from Him, but godly fear of God attracts us to Him. The fear of God must beautify and vivify our theology. Too often, man distorts the doctrine of God to create a god in his own image. The result is a banal but comfortable theology for sinners—marked by doctrinal error and

31. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:220.

practical irreverence. Martin Luther said to Desiderius Erasmus, "Your thoughts of God are all too human."³² Let us follow the Holy Scriptures to an awe-inspiring view of "the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy" (Isa. 57:15).

The general decline of godly fear among professing Christians today is directly related to an ignorance of God's holiness. John Murray said that the core of the fear of God is "the controlling sense of the majesty and holiness of God."³³ Wilhelmus à Brakel said that God's holiness is "the brightness of all His perfections," and God "reveals Himself as holy, in order that the heart of man may continually be filled with deep awe and reverence."³⁴ Mary's adoration of her Savior led her to say, "Holy is his name" (Luke 1:49). John Calvin commented, "The name of God is called 'holy' because it is entitled to the highest reverence; and whenever the name of God is mentioned, it ought immediately to remind us of his adorable majesty."³⁵

We dare not neglect God's holiness or the reverence that it inspires, for the fear of God is essential to Christ-centered spirituality (Isa. 11:2–3; Acts 9:31). Murray wrote, "The church walks in the fear of the Lord because the Spirit of Christ indwells, fills, directs, and rests upon the church and the Spirit of Christ is the Spirit of the fear of the Lord."³⁶ The fear of the Lord is the very life breath of God-centered obedience (Eccl. 12:13). It teaches us to value the smiles and frowns of God more than the smiles and frowns of people. It declares God to be big and people to be small. It is "a fountain of life," pouring out energy for the Christian to do his duty. Murray said, "The fear of God is the soul of godliness."³⁷

32. Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, in *LW*, 33:47.

33. John Murray, *Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 237.

34. Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 1:121–22.

35. Calvin, *Commentaries*, on Luke 1:49.

36. Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 230.

37. Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, 229.

It esteems the smiles and frowns of God to be of greater value than the smiles and frowns of people.

Is your worship sluggish? Is your obedience half-hearted? Do you find yourself easily distracted by worldly desires and anxieties? Have you shrunk back from opportunities to speak up as a witness for the Lord? Seek a renewed sight of God's holiness in the Word. Pray, "Unite my heart to fear thy name" (Ps. 86:11). "Sanctify the LORD of hosts himself; and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread. And he shall be for a sanctuary" (Isa. 8:13-14). When by grace you honor God's holiness, you will find that His holiness is and will be your hiding place. Praise God for His majestic, moral, and gracious holiness!

Amen.

The Compassion of Christ

(Third Sermon in a Series on the Character of Christ)

Pastor Ian Macleod

*And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion
on her, and said unto her, Weep not.*

—LUKE 7:13

Dear congregation, the Puritan Thomas Goodwin said that Christ is love covered with flesh. How true that is! Jesus Christ is God, God is love, and so Christ is love covered in flesh. This love of Christ expresses itself in many different ways. We saw that when we looked at the care Jesus has for His disciples—how He often brings them into difficult circumstances to show them who He is and just how much He cares for them. Here we are looking at a similar yet distinct character of Jesus, and that is His compassion. Benjamin Warfield says of this emotion of Jesus that compassion is the emotion which is most frequently attributed to Him. How would you describe the man, Christ Jesus? What would you say about Him? What do you see most often? What is it that others, who know Him well, would say of Him? There is this phrase that keeps appearing in one form or another: He was moved with compassion.

What is compassion? Compassion is an intense feeling of pity or sorrow for the miserable, with a strong desire to help them. That is what we see most frequently in Christ. That phrase that is translated, “He was moved with compassion,” is a very good way to translate that phrase because compassion has the idea of something that is in your very inner being—we might say something that begins in your gut. It is a very internal thing; it is at the very core of your being. We still use these expressions today. We

might say, if we are disappointed about something, “I am gutted; I am sick to my stomach; I am heartbroken.” Another Puritan, Richard Sibbes, writes, “When Christ saw the people in misery, His bowels yearned within Him. The works of grace and mercy in Christ come from His bowels first.” Whatever Christ did, He did it out of love and grace and mercy. He did it inwardly from His very bowels.

This is the most frequent emotion we find in Christ in the gospels, time and again. We see Him with this intense feeling of pity and sorrow for the miserable with the desire to help. There are many examples of this—there are many different kinds of misery that He found—but this is consistent each time: He is moved with compassion. Do you see the multitude that are faint and hungry? Matthew 15 tells us that Jesus said, “I have compassion on the multitude” (v. 32). Do you see crowds in spiritual danger because of their spiritual ignorance of God? Jesus was moved with compassion for them because they were as sheep not having a shepherd, and He began to teach them many things. Do you see a crowd of sick people? Jesus was moved with compassion toward them, and He healed their sick. Do you see a leper coming to Jesus asking if He was willing to make him whole? Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth His hand and touched him and said, “I will; be thou clean” (Matt. 8:3). This, friends, is the character of Jesus. He is moved with compassion. When He saw misery, He was moved with compassion. He did not turn away; He did not turn a blind eye or a deaf ear. When the miserable came to Him, He went to them. He did not send them away. How true it is of Him: in Him compassion flows (see Psalm 145:8). As many waves of misery would reach Him, there were waves of compassion that were meeting them—no matter the circumstance or the person.

Today, we want to focus on His compassion on the widow of Nain. Luke is the only writer who records this account. We want to see three things:

1. The misery that drew the Savior's compassion
2. The compassion that the misery drew out
3. The effect this miracle had on those around Him

This is the day after Jesus heals the centurion's servant. The centurion had sent someone to tell Jesus that He did not need to come to his house, because the centurion understands the master/servant relationship. The master gives the command, and the command is followed. Jesus is the great Master—He speaks the word wherever He is, and it will be done. Jesus tells him He has not found so great faith, no, not in Israel. Now Jesus and His disciples come to a little town called Nain, about 25 miles away. It is likely the end of the day, and they are looking forward to having a meal and relaxing for the evening. No doubt it has been a long day. There are many people with Jesus—many disciples. There may be some excitement here. But how different the mood is of the crowd that they meet coming out of Nain. It could not be more different, could it? Jesus and His disciples meet the most intense grief, the most miserable of conditions. Look at the middle of verse 12: "Behold, there was a dead man carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow."

Death is always sad, is it not? How many funerals this world has seen! How many tears have been shed—how many mothers' tears for only sons? But there is something particularly sad about this funeral. Only those who know the grief and pain of losing a son or a daughter can begin to tell something of this agony and sorrow. For this woman, this is not the first time she has been on this path. She has been on this path to bury her husband some time before, but now she is here again and there is a multiplication of sorrow as she now brings her only son to the grave. The Jews would bury on the same day the person died, so, in all likelihood, the son has died this day. It is very raw. We do not know how he died, but what we do know is that no one could stop it. The poor mother could not stop it; the physicians, if they tried, could not stop it; and certainly now, no one can reverse it. It is one of the painfully hard things we feel with death. We feel so helpless; it is

so irreversible. It feels so final. Psalm 49 tells us in Psalter 136, “Dust to dust, the mortal dies, both the foolish and the wise; None forever can remain, each must leave his hoarded gain.” This widow is all alone now. The tradition was that the family would go ahead of the bier, which was a stretcher, not a coffin, and the dead man wrapped in it, and she would go ahead. As Jesus and the disciples see her, she is alone. She does not have family with her. There is no one to support or care for her. It is about the saddest picture imaginable. What inconsolable grief, what inconsolable tears.

Dear friends, when we look at this picture, we must do what Jesus did, and that is to look behind this scene. We need to look behind the misery that is here and see a picture of the human condition because of sin. This is what we have to do with all of Christ’s miracles. They are not isolated accounts; they are all painting this picture of who Christ is and why He is here. Christ is God manifest in the flesh; He is here doing what only God in the flesh can do. What is He doing? He is coming, not just to take away the misery of our condition, but He is coming to deal with the cause of that misery—the root of the problem, the source of the problem. That is why He is here and that is what He is doing and that is why we need to see what is behind this misery. What is causing it? Why is there misery? Even today, we ask why are there doctors? Why do we have so many occupations that we call emergency services? Why do we have hospitals? Why is there a virus? Why is there suffering? Why do we have funeral homes and funeral directors? Why do we have death? Why are we so helpless? With all our knowledge and technology, we cannot do anything about it. We can contain it to a degree, we can limit it, we can prolong life a little; but we are so helpless in the face of death. Why? We need to see that, because this is exactly what Christ has come to deal with. He has come to deal with sin. Romans 5:12 tells us, “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” In death, you can put all the misery of this life. This is what Christ sees at Nain.

We grieve, and rightly so, when death comes, but the question is, do we mourn and grieve over sin? We mourn and grieve over the loss of physical life, but how concerned are we with the loss of spiritual life, whether in ourselves or in others in our families or friends? That is the real problem. The helplessness of this woman, at the natural level, to bring her son to life is a picture of ours at the spiritual level. It shows us how desperately we need the Lord Jesus Christ, but it also shows how wonderful, glorious, perfect, and suitable Christ is for your condition and mine.

No doubt, people here would have looked at this and they would have said, like they did in Bethany some time later, that He was too late. If only He had been here yesterday, or maybe even this morning, then maybe this young man would not have died. Yesterday there was mercy for someone else's son, for the centurion's servant, but He is too late here. They would soon realize that His mercies are new every morning. They would soon realize that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. They would realize His compassion never runs dry. Spurgeon asks, "Did he save your friend yesterday? His fullness is the same if you seek Him, His love and grace will flow to you today. He blesses this day, and He blesses the day after. Never is our divine Lord compelled to pause until He has recruited His resources. Virtue goes out from Him forever." Here is the misery that drew out the Savior's compassion.

Second, let us see the compassion that the misery drew out. In verse 13 we are told, "And when the Lord saw her." There is something hopeful, even in that. He saw her. He is aware of her. She has come into His sight. It is the first thing that compassion does—it notices; it sees. Notice that it uses the word *Lord*. It is speaking of the power and authority of Christ. We know He has authority and power over sickness; we saw that with the centurion's servant. In the days before, we see He has power over the lame, the blind, the deaf, the dumb, and the devil-possessed. We know He has authority over the sea. But the question here, for the first time, is, Does He have authority over death? Is He Lord over death? The Lord saw her, and then it says that He had compassion on her. The Lord

saw her pain and misery, and He had that gut-wrenching emotion, that intense feeling of pity and sorrow, and that desire to help her. Benjamin Warfield says, "His heart begins to throb with pity." I do not doubt that there were tears in His own eyes when He felt this great agitation and trouble, and what is beautiful here, too, is the way in which it tells us that He is the one who sees her before she knows who He is. Before she sees Him, He sees her. Before His words and actions go to her, His heart goes to her. You notice that this is so unlike the other miracles, because she does not ask for help. She has not noticed Him; she is absorbed in her grief. No one is asking Him on her behalf, either. The emphasis is entirely on the fact that He saw her, and He had compassion on her. This is not an example of faith or courage. This is an example of the free, sovereign lovingkindness and mercy of God. This is the Son of God in our nature saying, "I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." And I do not doubt that this dear lady would say later, "I love Him, because He first loved me."

It goes on to say that He saw her, He had compassion on her, and He said, "Weep not." In any other circumstance, you would say that is an incredibly insensitive thing to say. Doesn't the Bible say that there is a time to weep? Doesn't it tell us that it is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of feasting? Surely, if ever there is an appropriate time to weep, it is a widow at the funeral of her only son! And here is the Man of Sorrows, who is acquainted with grief, the one who will weep at Lazarus's grave, telling this widow not to weep! What is Christ doing? He is doing what He alone can do. He knows what He is doing. He is taking away the cause of her misery. He is taking away the cause of her weeping. He is destroying the works of the devil. This is a beautiful illustration of the gospel. The gospel does not just make us feel happy and blessed and take the bad life away and give the good life. Oh, to have the gospel in reality is indeed the most blessed life, but the gospel goes far deeper than this. The gospel deals with sin. The gospel deals with what causes the misery and removes that as well.

Verse 14 goes on and says, “And he came and touched the bier: and they that bare him stood still.” You would say there is something completely unacceptable here. You do not touch a bier or a grave. It makes you ceremonially unclean—except you are the man who is holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners. But there is something here we cannot miss as He touches this bier. Why is He doing this? He is confronting death. He is telling death and the grave that their days are numbered. He is coming for them. He will not run away or repent. He has put a mark on them. He will utterly destroy their power. He will redeem His people from the grave. Until now, death has reigned. From Adam, to Moses, and down to our own day, death reigns. But here was someone different, and hell and the grave and Satan and death shuddered when Christ, with His finger, touched the bier. He says they will meet again. It will be another city gate then. It will be another only Son then. As you look at the cross of Calvary, what you will see there, superbly and sublimely and superlatively, is that He was moved with compassion. That is what Calvary tells us. Every coffin of a loved one in Christ is marked. You can see it by faith. The fingerprint of Christ is on it. Christ has touched this bier. He claims this dust as His.

In verse 14 we read, “And he said, Young man, I say unto thee, Arise.” Again, this is utterly unheard of—a man speaking to the dead. “Arise!” The same kind of word, children, that your parents say to you, and the same kind of word that this mother would have, no doubt, said many times to her own son. Arise, it is time to get up. Here, Christ is saying, Young man, it is time to get up. Arise. Verse 15 says, “And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak.” It was a sign of life. He sat up and began to speak. I wonder what he said. Did he say, “What manner of man is this, that even the dead obey His voice?” There is a picture of the resurrection here. Dead bodies will rise to meet the Lord in the air. He will tell His people to arise, it is time to get up, it is the morning of the resurrection, it is the morning of a day that will never end. And His

people will sit up and will speak and they will say, “What manner of man is this?”

We read on in verse 15, “And he delivered him to his mother.” What tenderness; the Lord is full of kind compassion. Compassion had given Him this intense pain for her misery and this intense desire to help, but in Christ, the desire to help always moves to the act of helping. That is why we read, “And he delivered him to his mother.” One old writer says, “It is a picture of the happy reunion we will have in heaven—the reunion of every believer in Christ. On the great day when Jesus brings us to Himself, He will also give us back to one another.” Who are you waiting to meet in glory? I think there is a prayer here for fathers and mothers who are distressed about their children in every way—physically, too, but certainly spiritually. Spurgeon writes, “Oh, is there not refreshment here for you, mothers, who are weeping for your boys? You who have ungodly sons or unconverted daughters, the Lord sees your tears. You weep alone sometimes, and when you are sitting and enjoying the Word and think, oh that my Absalom were renewed, oh that Ishmael might live before Thee. Jesus knows about it. He was always tender to His own mother, and He will be so to you. And you that are mourning over those who have lately been taken from you, Jesus pities you. Jesus wept. He sympathizes with your tears, and He will dry them and give you consolation. He was moved with compassion.”

Last, we want to see the effect this miracle had on those around Him. Verse 16 tells us, “And there came a fear on all: and they glorified God, saying, That a great prophet is risen up among us; and, That God hath visited his people.” The first effect, very obviously, is worship. It is the same as when Jesus was in the boat with His disciples in the storm. Fear came upon them when Jesus performed the miracle. It is the same here. Fear came on them all—an awareness of God. That is what the fear of God is. They glorified God, they recognized that God had worked here, and they said that a great prophet is risen among them. They are close; it is not simply *a* great prophet; it is *the* great prophet. No doubt,

their minds are going back to the last prophets we read about performing a miracle like this—Elijah and Elisha. There are similarities, but there is glorious contrast that shows how much greater and glorious Christ is. There is a greater than Elijah and Elisha here. Elijah falls on his knees and he cries out to the Lord several times, and he gets down hand to hand and mouth to mouth and stretches himself upon the boy. It is expressing great difficulty in what he is doing, and great dependence on the Lord to perform a life-giving miracle. It was the same with Elisha—he stretches himself upon the boy. Again, there was difficulty—Gehazi could not do the miracle, and Elisha has this process, and it is all saying how difficult and how dependent they are on God. But here is a Prophet who simply puts His finger on the bier and with the breath of His mouth says, “Arise.” And immediately, the dead hear the voice of the Son of God, and they that hear, live. And then there is worship. He is *the* great Prophet.

There is also the effect of witness. Verse 17 tells us, “And this rumour of him went forth throughout all Judaea, and throughout all the region round about.” How could you keep this to yourself? How could you have seen and felt something of the deep sorrow of that poor woman in Nain, and seen Christ go and put His finger on the bier, and told her to weep not, and told the young man to arise, and keep silent about it? They could not. The report goes throughout all Judea and all the region round about. It was spread far and wide. But, my dear friend, don’t we have something even better to proclaim than what was seen here? Don’t we gather on the first day of the week every Lord’s Day, the day where we remember another only Son who was dead, and by an act of His own power, is alive again and is alive forever more, and has the keys of death and the grave? Christ is risen from the dead. He has conquered death. Death has been destroyed. There is an empty grave, so every Lord’s Day, we can say the Lord is visiting His people. Isn’t that why you are here this morning—to visit with the Lord? Isn’t this why others should come, too? Are you miserable? Are you in distress? Are you without God and hope? You are just

the people that should come, because Christ is coming to visit today, and He is so compassionate and kind and tender and loving and able to save to the uttermost. He is coming again to visit His people today with the everlasting gospel. This is the effect it had on others, but I want to close by asking what effect it has on you.

Does the picture here in Nain have this effect, that we see that whatever misery we have in our lives, the real problem is sin? We are spiritually lost by nature. Have we come to the place where we say we deserve to go to the place where no tear will be wiped away—a place full of sorrow and distress and not an ounce of compassion? But does it also make us recognize that we need a miracle of divine grace? Surely that is what this picture shows us. No mere human power can help us. We need God to intervene. Are you here today and you are spiritually miserable? Maybe you are here, and you say, I have tried to do what is right. I have tried to please God, but I have failed, and I am miserable with this whole thing. You find yourself, like this woman, in a way, helpless and miserable. You have tried to believe, you have tried to exercise faith, you have tried to repent, but you cannot do it and you feel helpless and miserable.

What you need to see here, and find in this Christ, is a Savior who is compassionate with the miserable, who does not call you to simply try harder. That is not the gospel. He calls you to trust and believe and receive Him. Faith is not our best effort. Faith is not simply a good and honest attempt. Faith is a giving up on all our attempts and a falling in helplessness into the arms of Christ's compassion and mercy. Has this been an effect, that you see Christ is able to give life to your soul, that is why He is here, full of compassion and tender mercy? Behind the mercy you see in the gospel, behind the power to save—yes, the power to raise the dead to life—is a heart that is brimful and overflowing with compassion. Have you seen that in Christ? Have you come to see that He has not come to destroy men's lives but to save them? There is only one miracle, as far as I am aware, that is a miracle of judgment—the miracle of the fig tree. All the others are telling you that He delights

in mercy, He is compassionate, He is able, He is full of pity for your spiritual woe. Oh, go to Him then! Are you here today and you feel miserable and depressed and anxious and worried? Christ, my dear friend, can deal with every human misery. You are not more miserable than He is compassionate. Remember the scripture He reads in the synagogue when He opens the scroll and reads Isaiah 61: “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified” (vv. 1–3). That is the Savior. That is why He is here.

Is the effect worship of Him? That will include sweet mourning. As Zechariah says, “They shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son” (Zech. 12:10). They look at Calvary, at the only Son bleeding, suffering, and dying there. He is full of compassion there—moved with compassion on the cross. You will weep tears of sorrow for sin, but surely tears of love for such a compassionate Savior. He will bring His people to the place where the inhabitant will not say, I am sick, where there is no more misery, and then God’s people will see Christ—love covered in flesh—and He Himself will wipe away every tear from their eyes. “And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her.”

Amen.