

SLIDE TO PERDITION

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Are there varying degrees of sin defined in the scriptures? And if there are why should we study them? Is this really an issue about which we ought to be concerned? Do any such distinctions, if they exist, really matter? After all we are Protestants. In Roman Catholic theology only mortal sins matter; venial sins can be expiated in purgatory. For Protestants all sins are mortal and any sin if unforgiven can be the basis for eternal condemnation to the lake of fire. In Roman Catholic theology the quantity of sin matters. If there are not too many they can be counterbalanced by good works; if you don't have enough good works you can dip into the supererogatory works of the saints. In Roman Catholic theology a nominal amount of sin can be dealt with by good works, penances, absolutions, and indulgences etc. But Protestants know that one single sin is enough to bring us under the eternal wrath of Almighty God. God requires perfection. Our first parents came under God's judgment and were driven from paradise for a single sin; they ate of the forbidden fruit. For the single sin at the rock, Moses was barred from entering Canaan, the land of promise. As God told Abraham,

"And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect. And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly" (Genesis 17:1-2).

God required this perfection as a basis for making a covenant with Abraham. Only because Abraham was justified by faith and legally declared perfect could he come into a covenant relationship with a thrice holy God.

"And Abram said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir. And, behold, the word of the LORD came unto him, saying, This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir. And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness" (Genesis 15:3-6).

And as Habbakuk stated it, speaking of the Lord...

"Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity" (Habbakuk 1:13)

If God requires perfection and cannot and will not tolerate any iniquity why do degrees of sin matter? When the world thinks of degrees of sin it thinks of deeds of great wickedness on the one hand. In the popular mind it is easy to imagine the wrath of God poured out on mass murderers, serial killers, child molesters and their ilk. In their mind hell was made for the Hitlers and the Stalins and their cohorts. On the other hand they find it incredible that a Mother Theresa should suffer a similar fate. But Mother Theresa while she diligently labored to assist the untouchables of Calcutta made it clear that she had no intention of laboring to convert them from their pagan Hindu faith. She was a humanist and not a missionary of the Christian faith. Her sins and shortcomings too, laudable as she

was in the eyes of the world, bring her under the righteous condemnation of a holy God. And if the end result appears the same, again we might ask, what significance can there be to any degrees of sin?

And if one single sin can cause all this why worry about degrees of sin? Not only can one single sin have such devastating and eternal consequences but this is true also of the slightest sin. This was the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the Sermon on the Mount he corrected the legalism of the Pharisees who waxed eloquent in denouncing the sins of harlots and publicans but rejoiced in their own righteousness. They prided themselves that they were not as other men, murderers and adulterers, etc. But Christ taught that that was not nearly enough to satisfy the righteousness of God.

"Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire" (Matthew 5:21-22).

Christ taught that denouncing one's brother as a fool in a fit of hatred and anger was a sufficient sin to warrant God's justice assigning one's soul to hellfire. Similarly Christ taught with respect to adultery,

"Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Matthew 5:27 -28).

One did not need to commit the overt deed of adultery; one need only look on a beautiful woman with illicit desire, to break the commandment and come under God's righteous judgment. And so is God's judgment on that most unruly of our members, the tongue. Again as Christ taught,

"But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned" (Matthew 12:36-37).

Again we might ask if we can come under eternal condemnation for speaking an idle word whose sentiments are contrary to the word and will of God of what practical significance can a study of the various degrees of sin really be? If the least sin can cause eternal condemnation why should degrees of sin be an issue? And similar reasoning could be brought to bear on this question with respect to the doctrine of forgiveness. If all our sins are forgiven what does it matter what degree they were? After all scripture says,

".....if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

And the Apostle John goes on to state the same promise of total and universal forgiveness of all our sins declaring,

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

As David taught in the Psalms and as Isaiah reasoned with God's people,

"Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow" (Psalm 51:7).

"Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isaiah 1:18).

Again some might wonder that if this be so, if all our sins are forgiven, if we are washed so completely of our sins that we are as white and pure as the driven snow, what incentive do we have to concern ourselves with varying degrees of sin? In this book we will seek not only to identify and to describe the Biblical degrees of sin but to answer the question of their significance. And the answer is not in legalism; we cannot earn our salvation. And neither can we escape hellfire by avoiding the worst degrees of sin. In fact as Job discovered his righteousness made him a special target for the malice of Satan. As a man of whom the scriptures record,

"There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed (hated) evil" (Job 1:1).

He paid a high price for his fidelity to the Lord and his faithfulness in keeping the Lord's commandments. But as we shall see there are sound reasons for studying the Biblical degrees of sin. First of all there are ample warnings in the scriptures about the deceitfulness of sin. As Jeremiah warned,

"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9).

And therefore Solomon warned,

"Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life" (Proverbs 4:23).

We need to know our enemy. We need to understand sin. We need to understand its deceitfulness. And we need to know its progressions. And to do that we need knowledge of the degrees of sin. Secondly if we would honor, serve, and please God we need to understand how to serve and please him. To do that we need to not only knowledge of sin, the sin that offends him; but we need an understanding of those sins that displease him the most. That is why the psalmist professes,

"Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee" (Psalm 119:11).

Finally we need to gain a better understanding of God and we need a better understanding of how God views our sins. As the Bible says God does not think as man thinks.

"For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9).

We need to learn to think like God thinks. Especially we need to learn how God thinks about sin. To do that we need an understanding of the Biblical degrees of sin. This book was written that we might to begin to better understand these things.

CHAPTER TWO

DEGREES OF SIN

Sin is a universal problem. Everyone sins and sin is encountered everywhere. Since Adam's fall only one person has ever been free of it, and that was our Lord Jesus Christ through the miracle of the virgin birth and a filling of the Holy Spirit beyond measure. And sin is universally recognized. Men may deceive themselves and fail to see their own sins but they are sure to see the sins of others. And with sin exercising such a pervasive presence it is only natural that men meditate on this ubiquitous problem. Men develop concepts of what is sin and what is not. As a society they codify these into law and make criminal codes. And then it is only logical that they take these sins that they have identified and begin to categorize them. They classify sins from minor to major. They weigh them from relatively innocent to aggravated. In short they set up degrees of sins. And when men identify what is sin and construct their laws accordingly they are frequently out of harmony with God's revealed will and what God's law defines as being sin. So similarly when they construct systems of degrees of sin they also fail to conform to the Biblical pattern. They do not think as God thinks about sin. They neither recognize nor implement the Biblical degrees of sin. Let us look at some of these systems before we preview the Biblical system of categorizing sin according to the mind of God.

The first unscriptural system that we will deal with is the Roman Catholic. It is also the one that we are most likely to have been exposed to. The entire Roman Catholic faith is an elaborate system for dealing with the problem of sin. It is a complex system of good works, penances, absolutions, and indulgences. It is a system whereby the guilt of punishment can be dealt with in a multitude of ways in both this world and the world to come. Most sin can be dealt with in this life by baptism, confession, and good works etc. What cannot be dealt with in this life can hopefully be dealt with in the flames of purgatory. Only where purgatory is insufficient are the eternal fires of hell necessary to deal with sin. This elaborate system therefore obviously requires some classifications of sin so the penitent may know how to deal with his sin. Remarkably the Roman Catholic system of classifying sins by degree seems extremely simple. The Romish system of doctrine essentially classifies sin into two categories or degrees of sin. They are venial and mortal. Venial sins are considered "small and pardonable offenses against God or our neighbor. Technically they need not be confessed and can be expiated by good works, prayers, extreme unction, purgatory etc."¹ Mortal sin on the other hand is "any great offense against the law of God and is so called because it is deadly, killing the soul and subjecting it to eternal punishment. Even after a penitent has received pardon a large but unknown amount of punishment remains to be expiated in purgatory."² The distinction between these two degrees of sin is very real in the Roman Catholic system of theology and is very significant to the penitent. The distinction itself is quite well defined. What is not well defined however is which sins fall into which category. "The terms are quite elastic, and permit considerable leeway.....There is no agreement among the priests as to which sins are mortal and which are venial.....What is venial according to one may be mortal according to another. If the pope were infallible in matters of faith and practice.....he should be able to settle this important matter by accurately cataloging those sins which are mortal as distinguished from those which are venial. But such a list no pope has ever been able to produce.....Among mortal sins, however, are those committed in breaking the ten commandments, together with the so-called "seven deadly sins": pride, covetousness, lechery (lust, lewdness), anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth. Included are practically all sexual offenses, whether in

¹ Roman Catholicism, Loraine Boettner, Presbyterian And Reformed Publishing Co., Phillipsburg, N.J. 1980, p. 200

² Ibid p. 199

word, thought, or deed, and a long list of transgressions down to attending a Protestant church, reading a Protestant Bible, eating meat on Friday, or "missing mass on Sunday morning" without a good excuse"³. The list may be a little dated but it gives the gist of things. The scriptures of course know of no such distinction. All sin is mortal and will lead to eternal condemnation in the lake of fire if it is not atoned for by the blood of Jesus Christ. Not only are these alleged degrees of sin unscriptural but they are barking entirely up the wrong tree. They are primarily concerned with the thoughts and outward actions of men. They deal mainly with overt acts. As we shall see the Biblical degrees of sin have little to do with the overt act or the outward severity of the sin and everything to do with the state of the heart before God.

Criminal codes of most nations form a similar pattern. This is but logical; after all we have no thought police. The civil magistrates necessarily restrict themselves to dealing with the outward actions of men. For example being a homosexual and having homosexual thoughts and desires is a sin but not a crime. However committing acts of sodomy is a crime and has been judged so by almost all nations until the recent drive for homosexual rights. Criminal codes divide crimes basically into three classifications. The first is capital crimes that call for the death penalty. The second are crimes that are not serious enough to require the death penalty but are serious enough to call for a period of incarceration. The final classification is light or even minor crimes or misdemeanors that can be dealt with by a fine. Most traffic offenses would fall into the latter category. These may be logical but they too miss the mark as far as conforming to the pattern of the Biblical degrees of sin. This is primarily because the Biblical degrees of sin deal with the state of the heart: a subject that the civil magistrate is incompetent to deal with. Only God is the discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And secondly they are off the mark because the Bible knows only of capital crimes and of restitution to the victim for all lesser crimes. Modern criminal codes have departed far from their calling of exercising an earthly ministry of justice by upholding the law of God.

The Protestant church has generally stressed the fact that ultimately there is only one classification of sin, mortal. It has also stressed the fact that all sins are in one classification with respect to another important issue; they can all be forgiven and atoned for by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The Westminster standards, starting with the Westminster Shorter Catechism, state,

Q. 82 : Is any man able perfectly to keep the commandments of God ?

A. No mere man since the fall is able in this life perfectly to keep the commandments of God, but does daily break them in thought, word, and deed.

Q. 83 : Are all transgressions of the law equally heinous ?

A. Some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others.

Q. 84 : What does every sin deserve ?

A. Every sin deserves God's wrath and curse, both in this life and that which is to come.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, in Chapter 15, "Of Repentance Unto Life", states,

SECTION IV : As there is no sin so small but it deserves damnation, so there is no sin so great that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent.

³ Ibid p. 199

While it is good to stress these universal truths and while it is obvious that these doctrines were set forth in opposition to the then prevalent Romish heresies on these subjects this should not blind us to a perception of those distinctions between different degrees of sin that are set forth in the word of God. These basically are subsumed under four headings...

1. Sins of Ignorance
2. Willful Sins
3. Sins of Nearness
4. The Unpardonable Sin

It is with these classifications of sin that we will be dealing as we set forth the degrees of sin that are in the mind of God as he regards his sinful creatures and judges them in holiness and righteousness.

CHAPTER THREE

SINS OF IGNORANCE THE DEFINITION

What is sin? The scriptures teach that sin is "*the transgression of the law*", of God's law. There are all kinds of things that are sinful and there are all manner of ways of sinning. As David stated it,

"I have seen an end of all perfection: but thy commandment is exceeding broad" (Psalm 119:96).

David is saying that there is no sinless perfection in this life. He is stating that God's commandments are so comprehensive, covering all aspects of our lives, that it is impossible to satisfy the law and fulfill all its obligations. Only one man in history has been able to do so and that was the Jesus Christ, the second Adam, whose human nature was filled with the Holy Spirit beyond measure so that he could not and did not sin. But not only are there many different sins but there are also different degrees of sin. These sins may vary in seriousness from a little "white lie" to premeditated murder. But when we speak of the degrees of sin we are not speaking of rating sins according to their seriousness. Neither are we speaking of human classifications of sins derived from systematic theologies, but we are speaking of classifications of sin revealed to us in the scriptures. We are speaking of classifications of sin according to their nature. We are speaking about how God thinks about our sins and how God classifies our sins.

The first degree of sin we need to study is sins of ignorance. These are sins that when they are committed the persons that are committing them are unaware that what they are doing is sin. Such is the deceitfulness of sin that the vast proportion of sins that are committed are not even considered to be sins. Such is the deceitfulness of the human heart. In the light of this deceitfulness of sin and the predisposition of the human heart to deceive itself with respect to what is sin the Apostle Paul warns,

"Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called Today; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" (Hebrews 3:12-13).

Sins of ignorance are sins that are committed inadvertently. They are thus distinguished from sins that are committed deliberately. The latter are committed willfully and knowingly. The former are committed because the person didn't know any better. David speaks of this in his prayers to the Lord when he seeks to be kept from sin.

"Who can understand his errors? cleanse thou me from secret faults. Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression" (Psalm 19:12-13).

David acknowledges the deceitfulness of sin. He admits that he does not know his sins; he does not understand them. He prays to be cleansed of his secret faults; to be forgiven of those things he has done in sinful ignorance. The word for secret in the Hebrew is "*cathar*" with a root meaning of to hide or to cover. David seeks pardon of those sins that he has committed which are hidden from him, those sins of which he has no knowledge. David confesses his sins of ignorance; he confesses that this is a universal problem and that no man can know all his sins; and David beseeches the Lord to cleanse him from the guilt of those things he neither knows nor understands. What a lesson for those who bask in their own self-righteousness and imagine that they have pleased God in all their ways.

But David does not stop here; he goes on. He continues his prayer for sanctification with a plea to be kept from presumptuous sins. The word for presumptuous in the Hebrew is "zed" which means arrogant, presumptuous, proud. David knows that his problem is more than just his ignorance of God's law. He perceives that the problem with his sinful heart is deeper than merely a lack of knowledge of God's law and an understanding of God's will. David knows what the human heart is capable of; he knows what even the regenerate human heart is capable of. David was later, in the affair of Uriah and Bathsheba, to prove himself capable of the willful sins of adultery and murder. And here he prays that God would keep him from such sins. He prays to be innocent of the "great transgression". The word used for transgression is "pasha". It means revolt or rebellion. This is not inadvertent sin accidentally stumbled into by a lack of understanding. David is praying to be preserved from moral rebellion against God's law, from deliberately and willfully sinning against the Lord.

David is familiar with God's law. He is aware of the consistent distinction that the law makes between these two classifications of sins. The laws God gave to Moses repeatedly distinguish between "secret faults", those errors we stumble into through ignorance, and the great transgression, those sins we commit in defiance of our knowledge of God's will. Repeatedly these laws mention sins of ignorance and speak of sinning ignorantly. They also speak of sins committed presumptuously, that is done in a spirit of arrogant defiance. The following are a few examples:

"And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, If a soul shall sin through ignorance against any of the commandments of the LORD concerning things which ought not to be done, and shall do against any of them: If the priest that is anointed do sin according to the sin of the people; then let him bring for his sin, which he hath sinned, a young bullock without blemish unto the LORD for a sin offering.....And if the whole congregation of Israel sin through ignorance, and the thing be hid from the eyes of the assembly, and they have done somewhat against any of the commandments of the LORD concerning things which should not be done, and are guilty; When the sin, which they have sinned against it, is known, then the congregation shall offer a young bullock for the sin, and bring him before the tabernacle of the congregation. And the elders of the congregation shall lay their hands upon the head of the bullock before the LORD: and the bullock shall be killed before the LORD.....When a ruler hath sinned, and done somewhat through ignorance against any of the commandments of the LORD his God concerning things which should not be done, and is guilty; Or if his sin, wherein he hath sinned, come to his knowledge; he shall bring his offering, a kid of the goats, a male without blemish: And he shall lay his hand upon the head of the goat, and kill it in the place where they kill the burnt offering before the LORD: it is a sin offering.....And if any one of the common people sin through ignorance, while he doeth somewhat against any of the commandments of the LORD concerning things which ought not to be done, and be guilty; Or if his sin, which he hath sinned, come to his knowledge: then he shall bring his offering, a kid of the goats, a female without blemish, for his sin which he hath sinned. And he shall lay his hand upon the head of the sin offering, and slay the sin offering in the place of the burnt offering. And the priest shall take of the blood thereof with his finger, and put it upon the horns of the altar of burnt offering, and shall pour out all the blood thereof at the bottom of the altar. And he shall take away all the fat thereof, as the fat is taken away from off the sacrifice of peace offerings; and the priest shall burn it upon the altar for a sweet savour unto the LORD; and the priest shall make an atonement for him, and it shall be forgiven him" (Leviticus 4:1-3, 13-15, 22-24, 27-31)

The above passage describes the requirements for the sin offering. This offering was specifically and exclusively for sins of ignorance. It states the requirements of the law for various classifications of

offenders: a priest, the whole nation, the ruler, and a common person. It is important to note that God recognizes these sins as a unique classification of sins and provides a particular sacrifice to atone for them. God knows our frame that we are weak and he judges us accordingly.

"And if ye have erred, and not observed all these commandments, which the LORD hath spoken unto Moses, Even all that the LORD hath commanded you by the hand of Moses, from the day that the LORD commanded Moses, and henceforward among your generations; Then it shall be, if ought be committed by ignorance without the knowledge of the congregation, that all the congregation shall offer one young bullock for a burnt offering, for a sweet savour unto the LORD, with his meat offering, and his drink offering, according to the manner, and one kid of the goats for a sin offering. And the priest shall make an atonement for all the congregation of the children of Israel, and it shall be forgiven them; for it is ignorance: and they shall bring their offering, a sacrifice made by fire unto the LORD, and their sin offering before the LORD, for their ignorance: And it shall be forgiven all the congregation of the children of Israel, and the stranger that sojourneth among them; seeing all the people were in ignorance. And if any soul sin through ignorance, then he shall bring a she goat of the first year for a sin offering. And the priest shall make an atonement for the soul that sinneth ignorantly, when he sinneth by ignorance before the LORD, to make an atonement for him; and it shall be forgiven him. Ye shall have one law for him that sinneth through ignorance, both for him that is born among the children of Israel, and for the stranger that sojourneth among them. But the soul that doeth ought presumptuously, whether he be born in the land, or a stranger, the same reproacheth the LORD; and that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Because he hath despised the word of the LORD, and hath broken his commandment, that soul shall utterly be cut off; his iniquity shall be upon him" (Numbers 15:22-31).

The above passage reiterates the requirements of the sin offering for sins of ignorance. Then it goes on to differentiate presumptuous sins from the former. For these latter sins there is no sacrifice; there is only the death penalty. The phrase "cut off" does not mean excommunication in this case but rather it implies to be put to death. The Hebrew word used is "karath". It means to cut off or to cut asunder. It is used of those passages where a sacrifice is cut in half (asunder) and the parties walk inbetween to consummate a covenant. It can also mean to destroy or to consume. All these clearly imply the death penalty. In all these passages the same root word is used to describe what is translated as sins of "ignorance". The word consistently used for ignorance is "shegagah". This word means mistake or error. The word erred in Numbers 15:22 is "shagag". It is obviously used to describe sins that are not deliberate. Men do not deliberately make errors. They do not willfully make mistakes. A sin that is committed in the nature of a mistake or an error is committed inadvertently. For this classification of sin there is a sin offering. Men can make a sacrifice and acknowledge their error before God and their sin can be forgiven. The Hebrew word for the adverb "ignorantly" is "shagag". The root meaning of this word is to stray or to wander. The meaning is clear. We are the Lord's sheep. When we inadvertently stray from the straight and narrow path and wander off we commit sin. But the class of sin we commit are sins of ignorance. They could be termed sins of wandering or sins of straying. Sheep are notorious for straying off. But when they do so they are not in a state of rebellion willfully defying the shepherd. They simply don't know any better. They are dumb, stupid sheep.

Christ in the New Testament continues to maintain and honor these distinctions in classes of sins found in the Mosaic law. In the following passage Christ sets forth his teaching on this matter.

"Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing. Of a truth I say unto you, that he will make him ruler over all that he hath. But and if that servant say in his heart, My lord

delayeth his coming; and shall begin to beat the menservants and maidens, and to eat and drink, and to be drunken; The lord of that servant will come in a day when he looketh not for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in sunder, and will appoint him his portion with the unbelievers. And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more" (Luke 12:43-48)

In this parable of the faithful steward Christ speaks of a servant who failed to do his lord's will. But he makes the distinction between a disobedient servant who knew his lord's will and one who did not. In other words here is the same distinction between sins of ignorance and willful sins that we have already discovered so clearly revealed in the Old Testament. And since Christ will be the final judge, appointed by the Father to judge all men, his recognition of this distinction is significant. As we shall see these distinctions will be maintained at the final judgment and will have eternal implications, a consequence that Christ is clearly pointing out in this parable.

CHAPTER FOUR

SINS OF IGNORANCE EXAMPLES

As we have noted the seriousness of the sin has little to do with its classification. A minor sin might constitute willful rebellion against the revealed will of the Almighty and a most heinous sin might actually be an inadvertent act, an unintentional error, a sin of ignorance. One of the most famous sins in history was just such an unintentional sin. I am speaking of the first sin ever committed by a human being. I am speaking of Eve's action when she took of the forbidden fruit in paradise, the garden of God. The Genesis account details the story but does not make the classification of Eve's sin all that clear. This is because the overt act does not decide, but rather the state of the mind determines the classification of the sin. Moses tells us,

"Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof" (Genesis 3:1-6).

From this account we might actually gain the wrong perspective on Eve's sin. She reveals a distinct knowledge of God's will with respect to the fruit of the tree. And having that knowledge she proceeds under the influence of Satan to partake of the forbidden fruit. This could easily appear as a clear case of willful sin, of sinning against better knowledge. It would seem hard to classify this as a sin of ignorance. Yet that is exactly what the Apostle Paul does as he remarks on Eve's sin in the New Testament. Not once, but twice the inspired Apostle states that Eve was deceived and did not understand what she was doing. First of all he tells the Corinthian church,

"For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:2-3).

Then he confirms this evaluation of Eve's sin in his statement to Timothy.

"For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression" (1 Timothy 2:13-14).

Paul is making a clear distinction here. He states of Adam that he was not deceived. Adam knew what he was doing and chose to sin with full understanding of the nature of his act. But Paul tells us that this was not the case with Eve. She was beguiled. She was deceived. Satan succeeded in confusing and deceiving Eve with respect to the nature of her act. She was seduced into believing that it was alright to partake of this fruit. She committed an error. She committed one of the most serious errors in all of recorded history. But hers was not an act of willful rebellion against God. She strayed and wandered from God's will, from the path of righteousness. She committed what we have defined as a sin of ignorance.

The New Testament gives us other examples of extremely serious sins that the Bible explicitly defines as sins of ignorance. Again this is hard to believe as we contemplate the heinous nature of these crimes. The scriptures reveal an incredible record of vicious hatred and persecution against the church of Jesus Christ. This murderous hatred evinced by the scribes, the Pharisees, and the Sanhedrin, led to the trial and execution of Jesus Christ and the persecution of his followers. In this persecution Saul of Tarsus played a significant part. We are told concerning Saul at the time of the execution of Stephen,

"And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison. Therefore they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word" (Acts 8:1-4).

And not content with the destruction of the church at Jerusalem Saul's vengeance sought to pursue the followers of Jesus of Nazareth wherever they might flee.

"And Saul, yet breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, And desired of him letters to Damascus to the synagogues, that if he found any of this way, whether they were men or women, he might bring them bound unto Jerusalem" (Acts 9:1-2).

These crimes were vicious. They were premeditated. They were driven by a murderous hatred. The cruelty of these crimes was visited on men, women, and children. This was a determined and calculated attempt to crush and annihilate the church of Jesus Christ. These crimes involved not only an implacable rejection of Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah but also a denouncement of Him as a false teacher worthy of the death that he suffered. Yet in spite of all this the scriptures make it plain that these were sins of ignorance. Christ himself foretold this persecution and defined the nature of this opposition when he taught,

"These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended. They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me" (John 16:1-3).

The Lord's people will suffer persecution; they will even be put to death for their faith in Jesus as the Christ. But those who are hounding them to their graves will sincerely believe that they are God's people and they they are serving God. They will be in error, in grievous error. But their sins will be sins of error. They will not be sins of willful rebellion against God and his Christ. They will be sins of ignorance. Paul, who played a principal part in these persecutions, states as much when he gives an account of his participation.

"According to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust. And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. Howbeit for this cause I obtained

mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting" (1 Timothy 1:11-16).

Paul was a persecutor of Christ. Christ himself confronted him with this fact on the Damascus road.

"And as he journeyed, he came near Damascus: and suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven: And he fell to the earth, and heard a voice saying unto him, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest" (Acts 9:3-5).

Paul was a blasphemer of Christ. He confesses this in the above passage. But he did it in ignorance. It was a sin. It was a great sin. Paul calls himself the chief of sinners. But he did it "*ignorantly in unbelief*". The word for ignorantly in the Greek is "*agnoeo*". It means not to know, not to understand or comprehend. Literally it means to have no knowledge of. Paul, like Eve, didn't know what he was doing. He didn't comprehend the nature of his actions. Until Christ revealed himself to him on the Damascus road he had no true knowledge or understanding of him whom he was persecuting. It was a sin of ignorance.

And incredibly enough, hard as it is to accept sometimes, the same was true of the rulers of the people. This sometimes staggers our imagination to think that the judicial murder of Jesus Christ, the crime of the ages, could be a sin of ignorance. But the word of God and not our feelings must be our guide. Their persistent opposition, their implacable hatred, their rejection of all that was righteous and good in him seems to be the ultimate in wickedness. They conspired against him; they bribed Judas to betray him for thirty pieces of silver; they declared him expendable for the good of the nation; they prostituted the judicial process by seeking false witnesses against him; they blackmailed Pilate into condemning him to a cruel death. Yet the testimony of the scriptures is that these were sins of ignorance. This was the testimony of the Apostle Peter.

"And when Peter saw it, he answered unto the people, Ye men of Israel, why marvel ye at this? or why look ye so earnestly on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made this man to walk? The God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, hath glorified his Son Jesus; whom ye delivered up, and denied him in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let him go. But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; And killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses. And his name through faith in his name hath made this man strong, whom ye see and know: yea, the faith which is by him hath given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all. And now, brethren, I wot that through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers. But those things, which God before had showed by the mouth of all his prophets, that Christ should suffer, he hath so fulfilled." (Acts 3:12-18).

And this was the testimony of the Apostle Paul.

"But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Corinthians 2:7).

And finally this was the dying testimony of our Lord himself when he said,

"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

They were horribly wicked acts as Peter testifies to when he declared,

"Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" (Acts 2:23).

But they were sins of ignorance and not committed in willful rebellion against better knowledge.

As we can see from these examples, the classification of the sin is separate from ranking it according to its seriousness or its heinousness. These were some of the greatest sins in recorded history yet they fell within the most innocuous classification of sins: sins of ignorance, errors! The classification has to do with the state of mind of the perpetrator of the sin and not simply a categorization of the overt act. For that reason in all these examples we needed the explicit testimony of scripture to make the determination. This is true because we cannot determine what is going on in a man's heart. Jesus told his disciples,

"Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles? Even so every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit. Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them" (Mat 7:15-20).

We can only judge men by their external actions. We can only judge men by their fruits, and that is exactly what Christ commands us to do. We are commanded to,

"Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment" (John 7:24).

We are to judge righteous judgment, that is we are to judge men's actions whether they be according to the law of God. We can and are commanded to judge whether something is sin or not. But this is not sufficient to determine the state of the heart. That is God's prerogative. As scripture teaches,

"For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do" (Hebrews 4:12-13).

God alone is the judge of the men's hearts and he alone is capable of that manner of judgment. And we must leave that in his hands.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE GREAT TRANSGRESSION THE DEFINITION

Having studied sins of ignorance we need to move on to the next classification. We have already studied the key passage that defines the first two degrees of sin. They are set before us in David's prayer for sanctification.

"Who can understand his errors? cleanse thou me from secret faults. Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression" (Psalm 19:13-12).

By precept and example we have already studied what constitutes the first degree of sin, secret faults. The next classification is presumptuous sins. We have seen that the word for presumptuous is "zed" and means arrogant, presumptuous, proud. We have seen that David calls this particular degree of sin the "great transgression". We have seen that the word used for transgression is "pasha" and that it means revolt or rebellion. We are now speaking of a degree of sin that constitutes open defiance against the known will of God. It is small wonder that David under inspiration, reflecting the mind of the Holy Spirit, calls it the great transgression. The word presumptuous or presumptuously occurs about half a dozen times in the Mosaic legislation and always in describing this classification of sins. In all cases it is derived from the same root with the same meaning as the word David uses in Psalm 19 (See Exodus 21:14 and Deuteronomy 1:43, 17:12, 17:13, 18:22). Only once is a different word used and it too casts an interesting light on the nature of this degree of sin.

"But the soul that doeth ought presumptuously, whether he be born in the land, or a stranger, the same reproacheth the LORD; and that soul shall be cut off from among his people. Because he hath despised the word of the LORD, and hath broken his commandment, that soul shall utterly be cut off; his iniquity shall be upon him" (Numbers 15:30-31).

In the above passage the word used for presumptuously is "yad". The meaning of this word seems to derive from a hand held in a certain specific position. My Hebrew interlinear gives as a literal rendering for "yad", of "with a high hand". The Septuagint states for this text, "shall do anything with a presumptuous hand". This seems to compare with the idiom of the English language "high handed". High handed actions are those that are committed boldly and brazenly in defiance of custom, convention, or law. These are actions that are flagrant. They flaunt their illegality and arrogantly proceed and of such David says,

"The LORD shall cut off all flattering lips, and the tongue that speaketh proud things: Who have said, With our tongue will we prevail; our lips are our own: who is lord over us?" (Psalm 12:3-4)

Such defiant and willful sinfulness is truly a great transgression. Such sins are not errors nor are they committed inadvertently. Rather they are high handed sins and the Lord sees them and judges them as such.

We have noted that the "secret faults" are sins of ignorance. They are errors that are committed inadvertently. These are the actions of sheep that have wandered from the straight and narrow, from the paths of righteousness. But it is one thing to sin in ignorance, but another to continue in that sin when the ignorance has been removed. It is one thing to wander off inadvertently when the shepherd

has his back turned but quite another to defy the guidance of the shepherd when he is present. When the former become the latter what were sins of ignorance become high handed sins. Moses makes this clear in the following passage.

"If there arise a matter too hard for thee in judgment, between blood and blood, between plea and plea, and between stroke and stroke, being matters of controversy within thy gates: then shalt thou arise, and get thee up into the place which the LORD thy God shall choose; And thou shalt come unto the priests the Levites, and unto the judge that shall be in those days, and inquire; and they shall show thee the sentence of judgment: And thou shalt do according to the sentence, which they of that place which the LORD shall choose shall show thee; and thou shalt observe to do according to all that they inform thee: According to the sentence of the law which they shall teach thee, and according to the judgment which they shall tell thee, thou shalt do: thou shalt not decline from the sentence which they shall show thee, to the right hand, nor to the left. And the man that will do presumptuously, and will not hearken unto the priest that standeth to minister there before the LORD thy God, or unto the judge, even that man shall die: and thou shalt put away the evil from Israel. And all the people shall hear, and fear, and do no more presumptuously" (Deuteronomy 17:8-13).

God had given Israel his law. In great detail he had communicated his statutes, commandments, and judgments. He had seen that Israel received these in a written form. The ten commandments, the moral law were engraved for them on two tables of stone by the very finger of God and preserved in the ark of the covenant. Yet in spite of all this Moses allows that there will be sins of ignorance. He knows that men will wander from the law. He knows that this will cause problems and engender controversy and debate. Men will argue, and sincerely so, that they have done nothing wrong. Others will accuse them of violating their rights under the law. How are these errors to be dealt with? Moses commands that the parties in the dispute resort to the Levites or to the priests in Jerusalem or wherever the Lord's sanctuary was established. There they would be instructed in the law of God. There a judgment would be rendered according to the mind and will of God. There the veil of ignorance would be removed. Now there would be no more room for error. Now the erring party could no longer continue to wander inadvertently from the path of righteousness. There would be now only two choices before the individual. He could receive the correction of his error and cease in his sin. He could offer the sin offering prescribed by the law and be clear of his secret fault and receive the Lord's forgiveness. Or he could stubbornly and willfully continue in his sin. He could reject the instruction of the priest and defy the judgment rendered according to God's law. He could transmute his sin from a sin of wandering to a high handed sin. He could elevate his iniquity from a secret fault to the great transgression. He could pass from a state of sin that under the ceremonial law could be atoned for with an animal sacrifice to a state of sinfulness that required the shedding of his own blood. He could pass from one degree of sin to the next.

But Moses' insight into the potential depravity of man does not end with those who stubbornly cleave to their errors. Moses goes one step further. What if the priest or the Levite sin? What if those who know the law willfully reject it and substitute their own words? What if someone to justify his sin presumes to speak words in the name of the Lord that God has never spoken? What if a false prophet arises to tickle ears and confirms men in their errors? Moses also deals with this kind of sin.

"I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever will not hearken unto my words which he shall speak in my name, I will require it of him. But the prophet, which shall presume to speak a word in my name, which I have not commanded him to speak, or that shall speak in the name of other gods, even that prophet shall die. And if thou say in

thine heart, How shall we know the word which the LORD hath not spoken? When a prophet speaketh in the name of the LORD, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously" Deuteronomy 18:18-22).

Moses starts off with a prophecy of the coming of Christ, the last and greatest prophet. And if a man was subject to the death penalty for refusing to submit to the words of the priest or the Levite so it will be with those who refuse to hear this prophet. But if a false prophet arises what of him? What of him who speaks presumptuously? What of the man who in pride and arrogance willfully substitutes his own words for the decrees of the Almighty? He too will be under a sentence of death. This too constitutes high handed sin. This too is a great transgression.

The Apostle Paul maintains the distinction between these two degrees of sin in his New Testament writings. These distinctions are not unique to the Mosaic economy nor are they simply ceremonial. They go to the very heart of the matter. They deal with the state of the heart. As Christ taught,

"For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies" (Matthew 15:19).

Sin comes from out of the heart. It is the Lord who judges the hearts of men. It is the Lord who sees the sinfulness of the sin that is there. This deals with the very moral state that men are in and transcends any ceremonial or dispensational considerations. And that is precisely what Paul teaches as he reminds the Hebrew Christians of the seriousness of willful sin, of high handed rebellion against God's holy law.

"For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses" (Hebrews 10:26-28).

Paul starts off by reminding them of their situation under the Old Covenant, the Sinaitic Covenant. He reminds them although there was a sacrifice, the sin offering, for secret faults, there was no sacrifice that could atone for high handed sins, for moral rebellion; there was no sacrifice under the ceremonial law that could cleanse from the great transgression. He reminds them that those who arrogantly despised the law of God could make no restitution for their sin but were put to death. All that they could look forward to was certain judgment. Paul then goes on to teach that with the coming of Christ such sin is even more aggravated and this degree of sin will meet with even worse punishment, with even more certain judgment.

"Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace?" (Hebrews 10:29).

There is much more here and we will look at this text again in a later chapter. For now all we need to note is that Paul warns these New Testament Christians with the warnings of the Old Covenant and assures them that God's anger with this class of sin has not abated but will burn fiercer than ever under the New Covenant.

Paul also alludes to this type of sin in his letter to the Romans.

CHAPTER SIX

THE GREAT TRANSGRESSION EXAMPLES

Some sins are greater than others. Some are greater in their heinousness, they are simply more depraved and wicked acts. Some sins are greater in the degree of sin; they demonstrate a more depraved and rebellious state of mind. And some sins are greater in their consequences. But no sin has ever been greater in its consequences than the sin of the father of the human race, Adam. Moses states the fact of the sin of our first parents so simply and directly, and in so few words, that it is almost impossible from the simple text to grasp the magnitude of the disaster that was befalling mankind.

"And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat" (Genesis 3:6).

We have already noted the nature of Eve's sin. We have seen from the inspired comments of the Apostle Paul on her transgression that it was an inadvertent sin, an error, a wandering from the path under Satanic delusion and deception. However this was not the case with our father Adam. Again to determine the state of Adam's heart we need inspired revelation from God, the searcher and discernor of men's hearts. And Paul's comments with respect to Adam are exactly the opposite of his comments with respect to Eve. Paul explicitly states that Adam was not deceived.

"For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression" (1 Timothy 2:13-14).

Adam was not deceived. What an incredible statement. Adam knew exactly what he was doing. He deliberately, consciously, willfully, and knowingly determined to disobey God. He purposed in his heart to defy God and break his commandment with respect to the forbidden fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Eve may have been deceived and misled but Adam was under no delusion when he rebelled in his heart, reached for the forbidden fruit, took it from Eve's hand, and committed the great transgression. We do not know why Adam chose to do this. He had no proper motive to sin. He had no constitutional inclination toward sin for God had made him upright. He was under no necessity to sin. But he sinned; he sinned freely and willingly; he sinned against better knowledge. Some commentators have attempted to postulate a motive for Adam's sin. They have proposed that his love for Eve drove him to it. He loved her so much and could not bear to be parted from her. And seeing that she had sinned and would surely come under God's wrath and judgment he purposed to share her fate. If she was to be expelled from the Garden of Eden he would go with her. But this is sheer speculation and there is not the least scriptural basis for it. It is only by Paul's inspired comment on his sin that we even know that he sinned deliberately. We can not read men's hearts, much less can we ascribe motives. All we can say is that with high handed sin he partook of the forbidden fruit.

The consequences of these first sins were incalculable for the human race. All the parties involved came under God's judgment. The serpent, whose body was used by Satan for the deception, was cursed to crawl in the dust all his days. Eve, who sinned a sin of ignorance, was cursed with the pangs of painful childbirth for her and all her daughters. Adam's sin was the worst and the judgment on his sin was twofold. First he and his posterity were driven from the Garden and sentenced to

with Abel, his younger brother and a "keeper of sheep" (Genesis 4:2), for an acceptable sacrifice. He may have felt that that was too demeaning and that the fruit of his labors was just as good. We can not be certain. Again the Lord alone knows the heart. If it was a deliberate rejection of God's ordinances with respect to sacrifice then Cain has the distinction of committing both the second and the third high handed sin in human history. For his murder of Abel certainly fits in that category. After his initial sin and Cain's displeasure at the divine rejection of his sacrifice God comes and speaks with Cain. God seeks to correct Cain and promises him that if he forsakes his sin and does well then God will accept him. Cain however spurns God's offer and hardens his heart in pride. It seems then that Abel added his counsel and admonitions to God's. For Christ says,

"Therefore also said the wisdom of God, I will send them prophets and apostles, and some of them they shall slay and persecute: That the blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world, may be required of this generation; From the blood of Abel unto the blood of Zacharias, which perished between the altar and the temple: verily I say unto you, It shall be required of this generation" (Luke 11:49-51).

Abel according to Christ was a prophet and as such must have preached the word of God. And it is most likely that was exactly what he was doing when the two of them talked in the field. But Cain didn't want to hear it. He had spurned the correction of the Lord and certainly didn't want to hear it from his little brother. So in his pride and arrogance he slew him. This was definitely a high handed sin. Cain had committed not only the capital sin of murder but also he had committed the great transgression. And men continued to sin after the similitude of Adam's transgression. Lamech's sin also seems to fall into this category. He openly boasts of his murder(s).

"And Lamech said unto his wives, Adah and Zillah, Hear my voice; ye wives of Lamech, hearken unto my speech: for I have slain a man to my wounding, and a young man to my hurt. If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy and sevenfold" (Genesis 4:23-24).

This does not have any of the earmarkings of a sin of ignorance but rather the contrary. This is evidenced not only by his boasting attitude and his threatenings of further murders but also by his knowledge of Cain. He evinces knowledge of Cain's murder of Abel and of God's judgment on it. But rather than fearing the Lord it brings out a blasphemous boast. God had reserved unto himself the right to judge Cain and had said

"Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the LORD set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him" (Genesis 4:15).

Lamech boasts that if anyone messes with him he doesn't need the Lord as his avenger but rather he will avenge himself eleven times more severely than the Lord could. Lamech displays a heart that is hardened in murder, scornful of God, and rebellious against his precepts. Man continues in his high handed sin against God.

Not just individuals can commit high handed sins but also nations as is the case of Israel at Kadesh-Barnea as the following account demonstrates.

"Behold, the LORD thy God hath set the land before thee: go up and possess it, as the LORD God of thy fathers hath said unto thee; fear not, neither be discouraged....Notwithstanding ye would not go up, but rebelled against the commandment of the LORD your God: And ye murmured in your tents,

and said, Because the LORD hated us, he hath brought us forth out of the land of Egypt, to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us. Whither shall we go up? our brethren have discouraged our heart, saying, The people is greater and taller than we; the cities are great and walled up to heaven; and moreover we have seen the sons of the Anakims there.....And the LORD heard the voice of your words, and was wroth, and sware, saying, Surely there shall not one of these men of this evil generation see that good land, which I sware to give unto your fathers.....Then ye answered and said unto me, We have sinned against the LORD, we will go up and fight, according to all that the LORD our God commanded us. And when ye had girded on every man his weapons of war, ye were ready to go up into the hill. And the LORD said unto me, Say unto them, Go not up, neither fight; for I am not among you; lest ye be smitten before your enemies. So I spake unto you; and ye would not hear, but rebelled against the commandment of the LORD, and went presumptuously up into the hill. And the Amorites, which dwelt in that mountain, came out against you, and chased you, as bees do, and destroyed you in Seir, even unto Hormah. And ye returned and wept before the LORD; but the LORD would not hearken to your voice, nor give ear unto you" (Deuteronomy 1:21, 26-28, 34-35, 41-45).

The account is rather self explanatory. Having been commanded by God to go up, and being in a state of fear and unbelief, they refuse to go up and murmur against the Lord. And then having been sentenced to the forty years of wandering in the desert and commanded not to go up they willfully disobey, go up, and are defeated in battle. Small wonder that the Lord called them a stiff-necked people. In this case they certainly stubbornly clung to their sin in the face of divine admonitions.

Sins of a high hand can also be both individual and national as in the case of David's taking a military census of Israel. For David who had written,

"Now know I that the LORD saveth his anointed; he will hear him from his holy heaven with the saving strength of his right hand. Some trust in chariots, and some in horses: but we will remember the name of the LORD our God" (Psalm 20:6-7)22

it was indeed a great fall to resort to a military census that he might take pride in the size of his army and exult in his power.

"For the king said to Joab the captain of the host, which was with him, Go now through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan even to Beersheba, and number ye the people, that I may know the number of the people. And Joab said unto the king, Now the LORD thy God add unto the people, how many soever they be, an hundredfold, and that the eyes of my lord the king may see it: but why doth my lord the king delight in this thing? Notwithstanding the king's word prevailed against Joab, and against the captains of the host. And Joab and the captains of the host went out from the presence of the king, to number the people of Israel.....And Joab gave up the sum of the number of the people unto the king: and there were in Israel eight hundred thousand valiant men that drew the sword; and the men of Judah were five hundred thousand men. And David's heart smote him after that he had numbered the people. And David said unto the LORD, I have sinned greatly in that I have done: and now, I beseech thee, O LORD, take away the iniquity of thy servant; for I have done very foolishly. For when David was up in the morning, the word of the LORD came unto the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, Go and say unto David, Thus saith the LORD, I offer thee three things; choose thee one of them, that I may do it unto thee. So Gad came to David, and told him, and said unto him, Shall seven years of famine come unto thee in thy land? or wilt thou flee three months before thine enemies, while they pursue thee? or that there be three days' pestilence in thy land? now advise, and see what answer I shall return to him that sent me. And David said unto Gad, I am in a great strait: let us fall now into

the hand of the LORD; for his mercies are great: and let me not fall into the hand of man. So the LORD sent a pestilence upon Israel from the morning even to the time appointed: and there died of the people from Dan even to Beersheba seventy thousand men" (2 Samuel 24:2-4, 9-15).

David persisted in this sin even after Joab and the commanders of the army protested and sought to dissuade him. Since the nation acquiesced in his sin it also became a national sin and the Lord's judgment fell on both David and the land accordingly.

Finally I want to record at least one high handed sin from the New Testament to show that this perverse malady is still with us. Let us examine for a moment Peter's denials of his Lord. The evidence against Peter is mostly circumstantial but altogether it is quite strong. First of all we have to consider that Peter was warned by Christ against this particular sin.

"Then saith Jesus unto them, All ye shall be offended because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad. But after I am risen again, I will go before you into Galilee. Peter answered and said unto him, Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended. Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, That this night, before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. Peter said unto him, Though I should die with thee, yet will I not deny thee. Likewise also said all the disciples" (Matthew 26:31-35)

In the Garden of Gethsemane Peter is warned again.

"And he cometh, and findeth them sleeping, and saith unto Peter, Simon, sleepest thou? couldest not thou watch one hour? Watch ye and pray, lest ye enter into temptation. The spirit truly is ready, but the flesh is weak" (Mark 14:37-38).

Nonetheless when Peter is challenged in the high priest's courtyard by a servant girl he immediately denies any knowledge of Jesus. Peter now gets his third warning.

"But he denied, saying, I know not, neither understand I what thou sayest. And he went out into the porch; and the cock crew" (Mark 14:68).

When that cock crew after the first denial it was a final warning and should have jolted Peter back to reality. It should have brought him to a sense of the enormity of what he had just done and what he was still prepared to do again. But at that moment Peter seemed to have hardened his heart against any other considerations except self-preservation. For he persists in his denials.

"And when he was gone out into the porch, another maid saw him, and said unto them that were there, This fellow was also with Jesus of Nazareth. And again he denied with an oath, I do not know the man. And after a while came unto him they that stood by, and said to Peter, Surely thou also art one of them; for thy speech bewrayeth thee. Then began he to curse and to swear, saying, I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew" (Matthew 26:71-74).

Peter is now even more emphatic with his denials and seals them with oaths and curses. It is hard to accept these actions as sins of ignorance. These are not the actions of a man committing an inadvertent error. Peter seems to be making deliberate decisions to save himself from sharing Jesus' fate by vehemently denouncing any knowledge of him. This is a sad hour in Peter's life. Peter's stubborn refusal to acknowledge his Lord is not ended until Jesus confronts him with a look.

"And the Lord turned, and looked upon Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And Peter went out, and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:61-62).

Mercifully, even in the midst of his trials and sufferings, Jesus seeks out Peter and grants him repentance of his aggravated sin. Surely God is good to his people.

If David, the Lord's anointed, the sweet psalmist of Israel, could commit the deliberate highhanded sins of adultery and murder how must we be on our guard. If Peter, the leader of the apostolic college, the one who had confessed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, the Son of God, could fall into the sin of thrice publicly denying Christ, with oaths and curses, after being warned about this specific transgression, how must we all pray for grace. We must all make David's prayer our own,

"Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression" (Psalm 19:13).

Amen!!!

CHAPTER SEVEN

SINS OF NEARNESS THE DEFINITION

God is holy. It is his ultimate attribute. It is the only divine attribute that is repeated three times when it is ascribed to him. He is the thrice holy God of whom the angelic beings in the heaven of heavens declare his holiness.

"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 6:1-3).

Because he is holy he cannot tolerate any sin. Therefore the prophet says of him,

"Art thou not from everlasting, O LORD my God, mine Holy One?.....Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity" (Habakkuk 1:12-13).

Because God's holiness is totally adverse to all sin and iniquity therefore he cannot regard it in his sight. When sin exists in the presence of God his holiness breaks out against it. Sin cannot exist in the presence of God. Therefore as soon as Adam and Eve sinned in Eden, the Garden of God, where they fellowshiped with God on a daily basis, they were driven from the garden and from his presence. When the Lord appeared to Moses in the burning bush he was instructed to remove his shoes and not to approach any closer.

"Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father in law, the priest of Midian: and he led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb. And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I. And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground" (Exodus 3:1-5).

Sinful man cannot approach too closely to a holy God. This was Isaiah's fearful concern when the Lord appeared to him.

"Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts. 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" (Isaiah 6:5-7).

Isaiah was concerned lest God's holiness break out and consume him. He specifically felt the sinfulness of his lips, that his words were not sanctified enough to be heard in the holy presence of God. An angel takes a coal from the altar of burnt sacrifice and sanctifies Isaiah. This teaches us that

only those who are sanctified by the blood of Christ can withstand the presence of God. This truth was indelibly impressed on Israel when they were at Mount Sinai.

"And the LORD said unto Moses, Go unto the people, and sanctify them to day and to morrow, and let them wash their clothes, And be ready against the third day: for the third day the LORD will come down in the sight of all the people upon mount Sinai. And thou shalt set bounds unto the people round about, saying, Take heed to yourselves, that ye go not up into the mount, or touch the border of it: whosoever toucheth the mount shall be surely put to death: There shall not an hand touch it, but he shall surely be stoned, or shot through; whether it be beast or man, it shall not live: when the trumpet soundeth long, they shall come up to the mount. And Moses went down from the mount unto the people, and sanctified the people; and they washed their clothes. And he said unto the people, Be ready against the third day: come not at your wives. And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud; so that all the people that was in the camp trembled. And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount. And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly. And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice. And the LORD came down upon mount Sinai, on the top of the mount: and the LORD called Moses up to the top of the mount; and Moses went up. And the LORD said unto Moses, Go down, charge the people, lest they break through unto the LORD to gaze, and many of them perish. And let the priests also, which come near to the LORD, sanctify themselves, lest the LORD break forth upon them" (Exodus 19:10-22).

The length and detail of this passage demonstrate the importance that the Holy Spirit has laid on this issue. It is no light thing for sinful creatures to approach into the presence of a Holy God. God wanted Israel to understand this and gave these detailed instructions to Moses. He wants us to understand it that we too might fear him and live. As God manifested his special presence on Mount Sinai, a presence marked with fire, smoke, and earthquake, the people had to keep their distance. They had to sanctify themselves and keep their distance upon penalty of death. Even the priests are warned and the terminology used is instructive, "*lest the LORD break forth upon them*". The reference is again to the Lord's holiness breaking forth upon them. The Hebrew word for break forth is "*parats*". It means to make a breach, to burst upon. The closer men draw nigh into the presence of God the greater the danger that God's holiness will break out against them and consume them for he is of purer eyes than to behold evil. As Paul warns the Hebrew Christians, "*For our God is a consuming fire*" (Hebrews 12:29).

This brings us to the definition of a whole new classification of sins; sins that take on a special degree of wickedness because they are committed in the very presence of God: a class of sins that are aggravated in their heinousness because they are committed before the very face of God. We call these sins "sins of nearness"¹ because they take their character from having been committed in a special way near to the presence of God. Like the other classifications of sin that we have studied the classification has nothing to do with the overt act. It can be a minor sin or a major act of wickedness. It can be an inadvertent or a willful act. But it takes on its character as a sin of nearness because it was committed near to the presence of God. But what does it mean to be near to the presence of God? Is not God omnipresent? Is not God's presence everywhere? Does not the psalmist say,

¹ I am obligated to Jim Jordan for this appropriate expression for this class of sins. He used it in an article in the copy of Biblical Horizons that I referenced in the Foreword.

"Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee" (Psalms 139:7-12).

While it is true that God is everywhere there are places where God specially manifests his presence. One such place we generally think of is heaven where he is constantly present basking in the worship of innumerable angelic hosts. But the Bible also teaches us that the very heavens cannot contain God, as Solomon states in his dedicatory prayer for the temple.

"But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded? Yet have thou respect unto the prayer of thy servant, and to his supplication, O LORD my God, to hearken unto the cry and to the prayer, which thy servant prayeth before thee to day: That thine eyes may be open toward this house night and day, even toward the place of which thou hast said, My name shall be there: that thou mayest hearken unto the prayer which thy servant shall make toward this place" (1 Kings 8:27-29).

Solomon acknowledges that although there may be a special presence of God in the temple, that God can no more dwell there, and the temple can no more contain him than do the heavens. Prayer was to be directed to the temple, as Daniel did while he was in Babylon, because that was where God was especially present to hear the prayers of his people. There he ruled over them and from there he watched over them and protected them. This special presence of God, evidenced by the Shekinah glory that manifested itself at first over the tabernacle and later over the temple, was one of the great blessings of the Sinaitic Covenant. It is when we intrude into these special presences of God that we have to sanctify ourselves and guard against committing any sins of nearness.

How do we know when we are in the special presence of God? What are these special presences of God? How can we define nearness to God? First of all we have to recognize that there may be different degrees of nearness to the presence of God. This was certainly the case under the Old Covenant. In Old Testament Israel there were different degrees of nearness to God. Starting at the furthest they were...

1. The nations, as opposed to the elect nation, the covenant nation Israel. That is where Jonah went when he fled from the presence of the Lord.
2. The land of Israel, the land of promise that God had set aside for his people by covenant and where he ruled them in a special way as both their God and their King.
3. The city of Jerusalem, the City of the Lord, where the people went up three times a year to feast before the Lord, and where God had placed his name and dwelled with his people.
4. The outer court of the temple, the court of the Gentiles, up to the middle wall of partition.
5. The inner court of the temple for true Israelites.
6. The Holy Place where only the priests might go to offer incense.
7. The Holy of Holies where only the High Priest might go and only once a year and not without blood.
8. The heaven of heavens where God has his throne and is worshipped by the angelic hosts.

We can see that under the Sinaitic Covenant there was great scope for committing sins of nearness. It was for allegedly committing one of these that Paul was almost lynched by a mob in Jerusalem. They thought that he had brought a Gentile into the inner court of the temple through the middle wall of partition. In Herod's temple there was a sign on this wall in Latin and in Greek that no foreigner could proceed any further upon penalty of death. At least in an external sense the Jews seem to have taken these things seriously. But what about under the New Covenant? Can we commit sins of nearness today? Does a special presence of God exist here on earth in our day? The answer is a very positive yes. One place where God's presence is with us today in a special way is in the church. In that sense the church has replaced Israel as that place where God dwells with his people. As Peter taught as he addressed the church of his day,

"But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy" (1 Peter 2:9-10).

What Israel was called to be of old, a holy nation of priests, a special people dedicated to the worship of God, is what the church is in our day. The church is that holy nation where we are in a special sense in the presence of God. Paul alludes to this also in his letter to the Ephesians.

"Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us.....Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:11-14, 19).

Paul uses the analogy of the Old Covenant to describe their situation. Once they were foreigners, members of the nations, and outside of Israel. Now being members of the church of Jesus Christ they are part of that holy nation and have gained access through the middle wall of partition to that special presence of God that his people enjoy. The elect of God in Jesus Christ gathered into his church have become that holy nation with all the privileges and the responsibilities of that special nearness to God.

In his revelation to the Apostle John, Christ also refers to this.

"And I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks; And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man.....And he had in his right hand seven stars.....The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches" (Revelation 1:12-13, 16, 20).

John sees the risen glorified Christ walking in the midst of the candlesticks, in the midst of the churches. There Christ dwells with his people and manifests his special presence. Paul impresses this truth upon the Hebrew Christians by comparing their situation with that of Israel of old at Mount Sinai.

"For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest, And the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard entreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more: (For they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart: And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake:) But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel. See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven: Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:18-29).

Paul says that we have a better covenant, a greater nearness to God, a better Mediator than Israel of old. But Paul also points out that we have a greater responsibility to sanctify ourselves and obey the word of God for one thing has not changed, the abiding holiness of God. What is still true is that *"our God is a consuming fire"*. Israel of old so feared the presence of God that they told Moses

"And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off. And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die" (Exodus 20:18-19)

They feared the presence of a holy God and called for Moses to be their mediator and speak to God for them. We have a far better Mediator, Jesus Christ, who as our Advocate intercedes with God, lest his holiness should break out against us, his sinful children, and interposes the merits of his atoning blood. Therefore Paul can exhort us saying,

"Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; And having an high priest over the house of God; Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (Hebrews 10:19-20, 22).

Let us rejoice that we can enter into the holy of holies, into the very presence of God, through the blood of Christ. God's holiness is great. Our sin is very great. But we have a great salvation through our Mediator Jesus Christ.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SINS OF NEARNESS EXAMPLES

The laws that the Lord gave Moses anticipated there would be sins of nearness: sins in holy things, and made provision for ceremonial atonement by sacrifice for such sins.

"And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, If a soul commit a trespass, and sin through ignorance, in the holy things of the LORD; then he shall bring for his trespass unto the LORD a ram without blemish out of the flocks, with thy estimation by shekels of silver, after the shekel of the sanctuary, for a trespass offering: And he shall make amends for the harm that he hath done in the holy thing, and shall add the fifth part thereto, and give it unto the priest: and the priest shall make an atonement for him with the ram of the trespass offering, and it shall be forgiven him" (Leviticus 5:14-16).

And indeed there are many examples in the scriptures of just such sins. Moses' own brother Aaron had two of his sons struck down by the Lord for such a sin.

"And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the LORD, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the LORD, and devoured them, and they died before the LORD" (Leviticus 10:1-2).

Incense could only be burned using fire from the altar of burnt sacrifice. Aaron's sons took strange fire, that is fire from another unauthorized source for this ritual. But they were in the tabernacle before God. They were probably in the Holy Place at the altar of incense. The Shekinah of God's glory hovered over them as they committed this sin. They were before the very face of God when they transgressed his commandment. They committed a sin of nearness. We do not even know if this was a sin of ignorance, an error, or a willful sin; but what we do know is that it was a sin committed in the special presence of God and that God's holiness broke out upon them and consumed them by fire.

The camp of the children of Israel in the wilderness was the Lord's war camp. The tribes were organized in a military fashion both in the encampment and when they were on the march. In this fashion they were intended to march into the land of promise, overthrow the wicked, and claim the land for the Lord. In the center of the camp was the visible sign of God's presence, the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. Within this camp any sin took on the aspects of a sin of nearness. This is brought out vividly in the account of the rebellion against Moses recorded in the book of Numbers. This was a democratic rebellion against the sovereign rule of God as their King. Korah, a Levite, and Dathan and Abiram of the tribe of Reuben led this rebellion. They said that they were as good as Moses and Aaron and that they could offer incense to the Lord for themselves. That is they sought to approach God with³⁰ going through either Moses as the mediator of the old covenant or through the Aaronic priesthood. They sought to approach near to God without a proper atonement for their sins. They sought to intrude into God's presence while they were in a state of sinful rebellion against his ordinances. The results of these gross sins of nearness are graphically set forth for us. First of all we see the rebels gather themselves to confront Moses but are confronted with the glory of the Lord, the visible sign of his presence.

"And Korah gathered all the congregation against them unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation: and the glory of the LORD appeared unto all the congregation. And the LORD spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying, Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment" (Numbers 16:19-21).

Then the Lord consumes the rebels. The leaders and their families are swallowed up alive into the earth and their following is consumed by fire from the Lord.

"And it came to pass, as he had made an end of speaking all these words, that the ground clave asunder that was under them: And the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed them up, and their houses, and all the men that appertained unto Korah, and all their goods. They, and all that appertained to them, went down alive into the pit, and the earth closed upon them: and they perished from among the congregation. And all Israel that were round about them fled at the cry of them: for they said, Lest the earth swallow us up also. And there came out a fire from the LORD, and consumed the two hundred and fifty men that offered incense" (Numbers 16:31-35).

But the people, not willing to submit to such obvious signs of divine displeasure, blame Moses and continue their murmuring and complaining. Again they are confronted, not merely by Moses and Aaron, but by the glory of the Lord.

"But on the morrow all the congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron, saying, Ye have killed the people of the LORD. And it came to pass, when the congregation was gathered against Moses and against Aaron, that they looked toward the tabernacle of the congregation: and, behold, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD appeared" (Numbers 16:41-42).

The Lord warns Moses to flee from the presence of these rebels as his holy wrath is about to consume them. But as a true mediator Moses intercedes for them even as they are rebelling against him. What a type of Christ who died for us while we were yet sinners. But even as he intercedes for the people the Lord's holiness breaks out upon them and they begin to be consumed by a plague.

"And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Get you up from among this congregation, that I may consume them as in a moment. And they fell upon their faces. And Moses said unto Aaron, Take a censer, and put fire therein from off the altar, and put on incense, and go quickly unto the congregation, and make an atonement for them: for there is wrath gone out from the LORD; the plague is begun" (Numbers 16:44-46).

By the time that the Lord heeds Moses' intercession thousands are slain.

"And he stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stayed. Now they that died in the plague were fourteen thousand and seven hundred, beside them that died about the matter of Korah" (Numbers 16:48-49).

What we have seen in this chapter is a series of sins of nearness, committed before the very face of God. These judgments came down upon them in the very presence of God, in the presence of the Shekinah glory manifesting his presence in their midst. Truly these were sins of nearness and truly our God is a consuming fire.

Another instance of a sin of nearness occurred when the children of Israel entered the land. The first city to be taken was Jericho.

"And it came to pass at the seventh time, when the priests blew with the trumpets, Joshua said unto the people, Shout; for the LORD hath given you the city. And the city shall be accursed, even it, and all that are therein, to the LORD: only Rahab the harlot shall live, she and all that are with her in the house, because she hid the messengers that we sent. And ye, in any wise keep yourselves from the accursed thing, lest ye make yourselves accursed, when ye take of the accursed thing, and make the camp of Israel a curse, and trouble it" (Joshua 6:16-18).

As the first city to be taken it was devoted to the Lord as a burnt offering. The translation here is unfortunate and somewhat misleading. The Hebrew word for accursed is "*cherem*", which can also mean dedicated or devoted thing. The city was dedicated to destruction and devoted as a burnt offering to the Lord. Nothing was to be spared.

"And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword.....And they burnt the city with fire, and all that was therein: only the silver, and the gold, and the vessels of brass and of iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the LORD" (Joshua 6:21, 24).

But Achan sinned and took of that which was devoted to the Lord for himself.

"But the children of Israel committed a trespass in the accursed thing: for Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took of the accursed thing: and the anger of the LORD was kindled against the children of Israel" (Joshua 7:1).

The result was the severest of judgments on Achan and his household. As Joshua had warned by touching the devoted thing he had made himself devoted to the Lord as a burnt sacrifice and they were all executed and their bodies were burned.

"And Joshua said, Why hast thou troubled us? the LORD shall trouble thee this day. And all Israel stoned him with stones, and burned them with fire, after they had stoned them with stones" (Joshua 7:25).

Why so severe a judgment? The penalties for theft were not nearly so harsh in the Hebrew Republic. But this was no ordinary theft. Achan had stolen that which was devoted to the Lord. He had as it were stolen these items from God's altar. This was a sin of nearness and was punished accordingly. There is one more sin of nearness of the many others in the Old Testament that we need to look at and that is the case of Uzzah and the ark. The story involves the return of the ark from its sojourn among the Philistines after its capture when it was hazarded in battle by the wicked sons of Eli.

"And they set the ark of God upon a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab that was in Gibeah: and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, drave the new cart. And they brought it out of the house of Abinadab which was at Gibeah, accompanying the ark of God: and Ahio went before the ark. And David and all the house of Israel played before the LORD on all manner of instruments made of fir wood, even on harps, and on psalteries, and on timbrels, and on cornets, and on cymbals. And when they came to Nachon's threshingfloor, Uzzah put forth his hand to the ark of God, and took hold of it; for the oxen shook it. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there for his error; and there he died by the ark of God. And David was displeased,

because the LORD had made a breach upon Uzzah: and he called the name of the place Perezuzzah to this day" (2 Sam 6:3-8).

The ark was the epitome of the presence of God. God ruled the nation from the mercy seat upon the ark. The ark was normally housed in the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle. No one was allowed to touch it not even the specific Levites appointed to transport it. They had to carry it by means of golden poles that were passed through rings on the side of the ark. The ark was the most sacred object in the nation. It was above the ark that the Shekinah glory hovered. Only the high priest could even approach the ark, and that was only once a year on the Day of Atonement, and only with the blood of the sacrifice. The ark was at the very heart of the theocracy. And Uzzah touched the ark! There is no indication that this was a willful transgression. The text states that God "*smote him there for his error*". What a severe punishment for an "*error*". The context indicates that he did it out of concern and respect for the ark when "*the oxen shook it*". But he touched the forbidden object; he intruded into the most sacred things of God; he committed a gross sin of nearness, and he died for it. That it was exactly that, a sin of nearness, is made plain by the text. For it states that, "*the LORD had made a breach upon Uzzah*". The holiness of God broke out against his sacrilegious presumption in seizing hold of the ark of the covenant. And David named the place accordingly, "*Perezuzzah*", the place where the Lord had made a breach upon Uzzah. That this is a sin of nearness is made even more emphatic in the Hebrew. We read before of when the children of Israel were at Mount Sinai and the Lord was going to come down and covenant with the nation that Moses warned the priests to sanctify themselves "*lest the LORD break forth upon them*" (Exodus 19:22). Where it says "*made a breach upon Uzzah*" the word for "*made*" is the same word as "*break forth*". Literally the Hebrew says the Lord broke forth a breaking out upon Uzzah. Again only the classification of this sin can explain why Uzzah died before the Lord because of his "*error*".

As we have noted sins of nearness can occur in any dispensation including our own. As Paul pointed out the greater blessings, privileges, and spiritual nearness to God of the New Covenant make our responsibility to sanctify ourselves in God's presence correspondingly greater. Paul in one of his letters warns the church at Corinth that they are committing sins of nearness. Paul condemns a number of disorders that are taking place in the Corinthian Church with respect to the observance of the Lord's Supper. He then sets forth the correct doctrine of the Lord's Supper as he Paul had personally received it from the risen Christ. Finally Paul gives them a serious admonition as to the consequences of their abuse of the Lord's table.

"Wherefore whosoever shall eat this bread, and drink this cup of the Lord, unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep" (1 Corinthians 11:27-30).

He says that they are guilty of sacrilegiously abusing the body and the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. He warns them to examine themselves lest they eat and drink of the Lord's table not to their spiritual edification but to their condemnation. The result of this sinful abuse of the table of the Lord is that "*many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep*". The Lord's judgments on these sins are sickness and death. Now it ought to be obvious that these are sins of nearness. These are sins that are committed as one is approaching God in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. If the church is the holy nation that Israel was once called to be then the Lord's Supper is analogous to the pilgrim who goes to Jerusalem for one of the annual feasts and feasts on his portion of the sacrifice in the temple courts. To commit blasphemy by profaning the sacrifice at that point in time, at that place, by

abusing the body and the blood of our Lord, our sacrifice, the Lamb of God, is truly a great sin of nearness. The judgments were also the same as on comparable sins of nearness under the Old Covenant. They are stricken with sickness, that is the plague, and with death. The closer we draw near to the Lord the more we have to sanctify ourselves lest we commit sins of nearness. Small wonder that Paul exhorts the Lord's people to examine themselves before they come to the table of the Lord.

Another example of sins of nearness under the New Covenant involves an incident in the early Christian Church in Jerusalem.

"But a certain man named Ananias, with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession, And kept back part of the price, his wife also being privy to it, and brought a certain part, and laid it, at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? Whiles it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God. And Ananias hearing these words fell down, and gave up the ghost: and great fear came on all them that heard these things. And the young men arose, wound him up, and carried him out, and buried him. And it was about the space of three hours after, when his wife, not knowing what was done, came in. And Peter answered unto her, Tell me whether ye sold the land for so much? And she said, Yea, for so much. Then Peter said unto her, How is it that ye have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband are at the door, and shall carry thee out. Then fell she down straightway at his feet, and yielded up the ghost: and the young men came in, and found her dead, and, carrying her forth, buried her by her husband. And great fear came upon all the church, and upon as many as heard these things" (Acts 5:1-11).

This is an interesting case as it again demonstrates the close parallels between sins of nearness under the Old Testament and under the New. And what it shows is that in principle nothing has really changed. For first of all it parallels the sin of Achan. Ananias and Sapphira had devoted the piece of land in question to the Lord. It had been consecrated to his service and the full price was to be laid at the Apostle's feet. They were under no compulsion to devote the land to the Lord but having done so they had to honor that fact. But in fact what they did was to, like Achan, take that which was devoted to the Lord. They stole from God. They stole from God's altar. And like Achan they were killed for their sin. They died not for the act of simple theft. They died for theft from God's altar. They died for a sin of nearness. Secondly this sin parallels the sin of Gehazi in the Old Testament. Gehazi was the servant of Elisha. Elisha had just healed Naaman the Syrian of his leprosy and had emphatically refused to receive any gift for the healing. But Gehazi ran after Naaman and by deceit obtained the gift that Elisha had refused and then returned and attempted to cover it up by more deceit.

"But he went in, and stood before his master. And Elisha said unto him, Whence comest thou, Gehazi? And he said, Thy servant went no whither. And he said unto him, Went not mine heart with thee, when the man turned again from his chariot to meet thee? Is it a time to receive money, and to receive garments, and oliveyards, and vineyards, and sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and maidservants? The leprosy therefore of Naaman shall cleave unto thee, and unto thy seed for ever. And he went out from his presence a leper as white as snow" (2 Kings 5:25-27).

The gift Naaman offered and refused was a gift to the Lord. The gift that Gehazi obtained by deceit was a gift that Naaman offered for the work of the Lord. But Gehazi stole it for himself and then like Ananias and Sapphira centuries later, lied to cover it up. The latter lied to the Apostles. Gehazi lied

to the prophet Elisha. Both lied to the representatives of God. Both lied to men who were inspired and filled with the Holy Spirit. In fact as Peter explicitly stated they lied to the Holy Spirit; they lied to God. Stealing from God and lying to God are not just ordinary sins of deceit and theft. They are sins of nearness. And these sins were punished accordingly.

The New Covenant is not less than the Old. Paul spends a considerable portion of the book of Hebrews defending its superiority over the Old. We have a better Mediator; we have a better sacrifice; the Lord's Table is better than the Passover. We are greatly blessed. But these greater blessings and greater privileges also entail greater responsibilities. We must be sanctified by the blood of the true sacrifice, Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, before we can approach near unto our God. We can only come in faith, cleansed with his blood and clothed with his righteousness, lest we be like that man who presumed to come to the wedding feast without a wedding garment and was cast out into outer darkness. Paul warns us of specific sins of nearness if we would approach God under the New Covenant.

"But I say, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils, and not to God: and I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils. Ye cannot drink the cup of the Lord, and the cup of devils: ye cannot be partakers of the Lord's table, and of the table of devils. Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? are we stronger than he?" (1 Corinthians 10:20-22).

"Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ? shall I then take the members of Christ, and make them the members of an harlot? God forbid. What? know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh. But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit. Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body. What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's" (1 Corinthians 6:15-20).

It is a marvelous blessing to draw nigh to God and partake of the table of the Lord. It is a great salvation that God would regenerate us and sanctify us by his Spirit. It is an incredible blessing that the Holy Spirit of God would dwell within us sinners, and that we can become temples of the living God even as our Lord Jesus Christ who was the true temple that would be raised up in three days. But the blessings of nearness need to make us on guard against sins of nearness. Let us heed the Apostle's warnings and seek that *"holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord"* (Hebrews 12:14). Amen.

CHAPTER NINE

THE UNPARDONABLE SIN THE DEFINITION

Is there an unpardonable sin? And if there is what is it? And does not God promise to forgive all sin? Does not the scripture say and without any apparent qualification,

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Is there actually a sin that God will not forgive? First of all we have to fine tune the question. Is there a class of sin that God will never forgive? We therefore have to distinguish between a degree of sin that God will never pardon and certain sins that God has in his sovereignty revealed that he will not pardon. Jeremiah gives us an example of the latter.

"Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense unto Baal, and walk after other gods whom ye know not; And come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, We are delivered to do all these abominations? Is this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, even I have seen it, saith the LORD. Therefore will I do unto this house, which is called by my name, wherein ye trust, and unto the place which I gave to you and to your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of my sight, as I have cast out all your brethren, even the whole seed of Ephraim. Therefore pray not thou for this people, neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession to me: for I will not hear thee" (Jeremiah 7:9-11, 14-16).

"Thus saith the LORD unto this people, Thus have they loved to wander, they have not refrained their feet, therefore the LORD doth not accept them; he will now remember their iniquity, and visit their sins. Then said the LORD unto me, Pray not for this people for their good. When they fast, I will not hear their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and an oblation, I will not accept them: but I will consume them by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence" (Jeremiah 14:10-12).

What we have in the above passages is God's pronouncement that he will not forgive Judah's sins. This is not because they are of a class of sins that God will never pardon. This is not because they have committed the unpardonable sin on a national scale. It is simply because God is saying enough is enough. God is saying to them you have piled sin upon sin until you have wearied me. God is saying you have ignored all my admonitions and rejected my word and my counsel. God is saying that the time has passed for repentance and the time has come for judgment. God is saying that the time for prayer and intercession on behalf of Judah has passed and it is now too late. The time for sacrifice and absolution has passed and God is now determined to punish Judah's sins.

But in the following passages we see something entirely different. We have Biblical testimony that there is a class of sins that God will not forgive; a class of sins so severe that we are not even to pray for those who have committed them.

"These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God. And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: And if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of

him. If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it. All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death" (1 John 5:13-17).

First of all John reaffirms salvation by faith in Jesus Christ. The existence of an unpardonable sin cannot and does not effect that elementary truth. Secondly John reaffirms that God is the hearer and the answerer of prayer and that those things we ask in faith we will receive. John then proceeds to a specific example of answered prayer. He states that if we engage in intercessory prayer for a brother who has sinned that God can and will answer such petitions also, such as when Abraham prayed for Lot. But John states one qualifier to this promise of God's answer to prayer for a sinning brother. It must not be prayer for one who has sinned the "*sin unto death*". For such we are not to pray. For such we are forbidden to intercede. Now it is evident that John is talking about something very different than Jeremiah was. John is talking about a specific class of sin that constitutes "*sin unto death*" for which there is no forgiveness and for which there is no intercession allowed. John is speaking about what we generally call "the unpardonable sin". John establishes for us that there is such a thing as an unpardonable sin. But John does not tell us what kind of sin is so extreme in its degree of sinfulness that it is unpardonable. John leaves us with the question of what is the unpardonable sin: a question that is answered by the Lord Jesus Christ during his earthly ministry. Jesus identified the unpardonable sin. Jesus taught,

"Then was brought unto him one possessed with a devil, blind, and dumb: and he healed him, insomuch that the blind and dumb both spake and saw. And all the people were amazed, and said, Is not this the son of David? But when the Pharisees heard it, they said, This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils. And Jesus knew their thoughts, and said unto them, Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand: And if Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself; how shall then his kingdom stand? And if I by Beelzebub cast out devils, by whom do your children cast them out? therefore they shall be your judges. But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God is come unto you. Or else how can one enter into a strong man's house, and spoil his goods, except he first bind the strong man? and then he will spoil his house. He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad. Wherefore I say unto you, All manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come" (Matthew 12:22-32).

The passage starts with Christ casting out a demon from a man so possessed. The multitudes praise Jesus as the Son of David, the Messiah. The Pharisees in their hatred of Jesus continue to resist his ministry and unable to dispute the reality of his miracles make the claim that his supernatural power is itself demonic. They state that his power comes from Beelzebub, the prince of the devils. Beelzebub or Baalzebub is a Philistine deity. The title literally means Lord of the Flies. Christ discounts their argument by showing the logical absurdity of Satan casting out Satan. But then Christ proceeds to go on the offensive. They have accused him of being on the wrong side; now he accuses them. He states that there is no neutrality. If they are not for him then they are against him. He is casting out Satan and if they are not for him they are the ones on Satan's side. And then Christ delivers to them a most sober warning. All their opposition to him; all their resistance to his ministry and their desecration of his person; all these are still forgivable offenses. But there is a limit to the degree of sin that God will forgive either in this life or in the world to come. And that limit is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Christ has "*cast out devils by the Spirit of God*". They have

attributed this to the demonic Beelzebul. They are blaspheming the Holy Spirit. They are committing a sin that God will never forgive. They are doing that which is unpardonable. Christ has identified the unpardonable sin. It is the "*blasphemy against the Holy Ghost*".

There are two more passages that deal with this sin and give us further light on its nature. They are both passages written by the Apostle Paul.

"Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this will we do, if God permit. For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame. For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God: But that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned. But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak." (Hebrews 6:1-9).

At the end of the previous chapter Paul has been complaining that they have not been very good students of the word, and that though by now they ought to be proficient in the basics and ready to go on to the deeper doctrines of the faith they are still, theologically speaking, in kindergarten. In the beginning of the above passage Paul states that he doesn't want to start with the ABC's of the faith again but wants to forge ahead and build on the foundation he has already laid. Paul says he intends to do this if the Lord wills. But Paul warns that the "*if the Lord wills*" is not to be taken for granted. Many of the Hebrew Christians have backslidden and fallen away from the faith. They have lost even the fundamentals of Christianity. But Paul warns that there is a degree of backsliding from which God will not permit them to recover. Paul warns that there is an extreme falling away from which it is impossible to be recovered from. Is Paul warning them about committing the unpardonable sin? It certainly seems like it. If so Paul elaborates on this theme in another passage again directed to the same people.

"For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? For we know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge his people. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:26-31).

Here again Paul speaks of a sin for which there is no sacrifice, of a sin which condemns those who commit it to certain judgment with no hope of forgiveness. Now it is one thing for Paul to call to their remembrance that under the ceremonial law there was no sacrifice for willful sins. After all Paul has already reminded them "*.....it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins*" (Hebrews 10:4). Paul has been setting forth the superiority of the New Covenant and the superiority of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

warned. They are playing with fire, for as Paul says, "*Our God is a consuming fire*" and "*it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*".

CHAPTER TEN

THE UNPARDONABLE SIN EXAMPLES

When it comes to examples of those who have committed this sin it is impossible to be absolutely definite. As with willful sins versus sins of ignorance only God can discern the thoughts and intents of the heart. Without divine revelation we can never be absolutely sure. Nevertheless there are a number of Biblical characters whose sins seem to fit the qualifications for the unpardonable sin. One example from the Old Testament that I would propose as a case of the unpardonable sin is Saul, the first king of Israel. His actions meet all the requirements. He certainly was in a position that he was able to commit that sin. First of all he was the Lord's anointed.

"To morrow about this time I will send thee a man out of the land of Benjamin, and thou shalt anoint him to be captain over my people Israel, that he may save my people out of the hand of the Philistines: for I have looked upon my people, because their cry is come unto me. And when Samuel saw Saul, the LORD said unto him, Behold the man whom I spake to thee of! this same shall reign over my people" (1 Samuel 9:16-17).

As king over Israel it was his duty to rule the nation according to God's covenant and enforce all the laws, statutes, and commandments of that covenant. God was the true King of Israel and Saul was as it were God's prime minister ruling the nation in his name. Secondly Saul was a prophet of the Lord. The scripture says,

"After that thou shalt come to the hill of God, where is the garrison of the Philistines: and it shall come to pass, when thou art come thither to the city, that thou shalt meet a company of prophets coming down from the high place with a psaltery, and a tabret, and a pipe, and a harp, before them; and they shall prophesy: And the spirit of the LORD will come upon thee, and thou shalt prophesy with them, and shalt be turned into another man. And let it be, when these signs are come unto thee, that thou do as occasion serve thee; for God is with thee. And thou shalt go down before me to Gilgal; and, behold, I will come down unto thee, to offer burnt offerings, and to sacrifice sacrifices of peace offerings: seven days shalt thou tarry, till I come to thee, and show thee what thou shalt do. And it was so, that when he had turned his back to go from Samuel, God gave him another heart: and all those signs came to pass that day. And when they came thither to the hill, behold, a company of prophets met him; and the spirit of God came upon him, and he prophesied among them. And it came to pass, when all that knew him beforetime saw that, behold, he prophesied among the prophets, then the people said one to another, What is this that is come unto the son of Kish? Is Saul also among the prophets? And one of the same place answered and said, But who is their father? Therefore it became a proverb, Is Saul also among the prophets?" (1 Samuel 10:5-12).

Certainly Saul was in a position to commit an extreme sin of nearness. As Paul later stated it Saul was one of those who had, "*tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost*". Saul also committed a number of willful sins of nearness, sins in holy things. First of all he intruded into those things that God had reserved for the Aaronic priesthood. When Saul was first king the Philistines again threatened the land with a massive force which included thirty thousand chariots. Saul, as king, raised the Israelite militias and prepared to do battle. The nation was terrified and trembling with fear as they all awaited Samuel so they could offer the necessary sacrifices.

"When the men of Israel saw that they were in a strait, (for the people were distressed,) then the people did hide themselves in caves, and in thickets, and in rocks, and in high places, and in pits. And some of the Hebrews went over Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. As for Saul, he was yet in Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling. And he tarried seven days, according to the set time that Samuel had appointed: but Samuel came not to Gilgal; and the people were scattered from him. And Saul said, Bring hither a burnt offering to me, and peace offerings. And he offered the burnt offering. And it came to pass, that as soon as he had made an end of offering the burnt offering, behold, Samuel came; and Saul went out to meet him, that he might salute him. And Samuel said, What hast thou done? And Saul said, Because I saw that the people were scattered from me, and that thou camest not within the days appointed, and that the Philistines gathered themselves together at Michmash; Therefore said I, The Philistines will come down now upon me to Gilgal, and I have not made supplication unto the LORD: I forced myself therefore, and offered a burnt offering. And Samuel said to Saul, Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the LORD thy God, which he commanded thee: for now would the LORD have established thy kingdom upon Israel for ever. But now thy kingdom shall not continue: the LORD hath sought him a man after his own heart, and the LORD hath commanded him to be captain over his people, because thou hast not kept that which the LORD commanded thee" (1 Samuel 13:6-14).

This is certainly a serious sin of nearness and it definitely was willful. Saul admitted that, when he made his lame excuses to Samuel and acknowledged that he forced himself to do what he knew to be illegal due to the desperate national circumstances. But there is more. A few years later Saul was given a commission to go and exterminate the Amalekites.

"Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass" (1 Samuel 15:3).

But Saul failed to thoroughly execute his commission from the Lord.

"And Saul smote the Amalekites from Havilah until thou comest to Shur, that is over against Egypt. And he took Agag the king of the Amalekites alive, and utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. But Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them: but every thing that was vile and refuse, that they destroyed utterly" (1 Samuel 15:7-9).

I believe that there is a parallel here with Jericho. I believe that the nation of Amalek was also "devoted" to the Lord and therefore to be set apart for total destruction. Saul's sin is therefore like Achan's but on a grand scale. But Saul's sin is not only greater in scope but more aggravated in its degree. He steals from the Lord all the best of everything and he offers to the Lord all the vile and worthless things. But God is not mocked and Samuel's rebuke is a classic verse dealing with willful sin. To Saul's deceptive excuse that the animals were spared so they might later be offered to the Lord in sacrifice at Gilgal he responds,

"And Samuel said, Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the LORD, he hath also rejected thee from being king" (1 Samuel 15:22-23).

Note that Samuel calls his sin rebellion and compares it with witchcraft. This is a willful sin, a willful rebellious sin in the holy things of God. But the final sin that may really qualify Saul as one who has committed the unpardonable sin came at the very end of his life.

"And the Philistines gathered themselves together, and came and pitched in Shunem: and Saul gathered all Israel together, and they pitched in Gilboa. And when Saul saw the host of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart greatly trembled. And when Saul inquired of the LORD, the LORD answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets. Then said Saul unto his servants, Seek me a woman that hath a familiar spirit, that I may go to her, and inquire of her. And his servants said to him, Behold, there is a woman that hath a familiar spirit at Endor. And Saul disguised himself, and put on other raiment, and he went, and two men with him, and they came to the woman by night: and he said, I pray thee, divine unto me by the familiar spirit, and bring me him up, whom I shall name unto thee. And the woman said unto him, Behold, thou knowest what Saul hath done, how he hath cut off those that have familiar spirits, and the wizards, out of the land: wherefore then layest thou a snare for my life, to cause me to die? And Saul swore to her by the LORD, saying, As the LORD liveth, there shall no punishment happen to thee for this thing" (1 Samuel 28:4-10).

Saul, threatened by the Philistines and forsaken of God, turns to a demonic source for guidance and to inquire into the future. Is this blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? Is this doing "*despite unto the Spirit of grace?*" For someone who once prophesied under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to now forsake that Spirit and seek out guidance from a demon is indeed a dark and terrible fall from grace. Was it the ultimate fall? Did Saul commit the unpardonable sin? The case against Saul is probably as strong a case as we will find in the scriptures. All the elements are there. But the Lord only knows.

Over one thousand years after Saul's death, the night after he saw the witch at Endor, there was another Benjamite named Saul, Saul of Tarsus. We do not know but it is quite possible his parents named him Saul in honor of the first and only Benjamite King of Israel. But he didn't keep that name and Saul the persecutor became Paul, the Apostle of Jesus Christ. And as such he wrote to the Children of Israel two of the most comprehensive warnings against committing the unpardonable sin ever written. One wonders if when he wrote them he possibly had his original name sake, and the total shipwreck that he made of his faith and calling, on his mind.

A similar case, and therefore I will mention it but briefly, is the case of Balaam. Like Saul Balaam was a prophet of the Lord. When Israel came out of the wilderness and Balak, king of Moab, saw what they had done to the Amorites he feared Israel greatly. Not willing to risk a military encounter he sought to defeat them another way and he hired Balaam to curse them. But every time Balaam sought to curse them the Spirit of God caused nothing but blessings on Israel to pour out of his mouth till Balak was disgusted with him and they parted.

"And Balaam rose up, and went and returned to his place: and Balak also went his way. And Israel abode in Shittim, and the people began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab. And they called the people unto the sacrifices of their gods: and the people did eat, and bowed down to their gods. And Israel joined himself unto Baalpeor: and the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel" (Numbers 24:25-25:3).

It appears that Balak gave up and that the Lord in his displeasure dealt with Israel, judging them by a plague for their idolatry and fornication: a plague that would have accomplished all of Balak's

objectives, that would have fulfilled the curses that the Lord would not allow Balaam to utter; a plague, that except for the intervention of Phinehas, would have destroyed all Israel.

"And those that died in the plague were twenty and four thousand. And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, hath turned my wrath away from the children of Israel, while he was zealous for my sake among them, that I consumed not the children of Israel in my jealousy" (Numbers 25:9-11).

Actually all this was the result of the work of Balak and Balaam. The New Testament provides the connection. Christ in his letters to the seven churches of Asia rebukes the Church of Pergamos saying,

"But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication. So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, which thing I hate. Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth." (Revelation 2:14-16).

It seems that Balaam almost prevailed after all. He taught Balak how to stop Israel: seduce Israel into fornication and idolatry and they will cease to be a threat. You will not have to fight them; God himself will destroy them for you. When this Satanic tactic for the destruction of God's church reappeared in New Testament times it is called the "*doctrine of Balaam*" or the "*doctrine of the Nicolaitanes*". They are the same thing. "The Greek *Nicolaos* is.....an approximate equivalent to the Hebrew Balaam, the lord.....or, according to another derivation, the devourer of the people."¹ Why would a prophet of the most high God known for his inspired utterances do such a thing? Again the New Testament holds the key.

"And shall receive the reward of unrighteousness, as they that count it pleasure to riot in the day time. Spots they are and blemishes, sporting themselves with their own deceivings while they feast with you; Having eyes full of adultery, and that cannot cease from sin; beguiling unstable souls: an heart they have exercised with covetous practices; cursed children: Which have forsaken the right way, and are gone astray, following the way of Balaam the son of Bosor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness; But was rebuked for his iniquity: the dumb ass speaking with man's voice forbad the madness of the prophet. These are wells without water, clouds that are carried with a tempest; to whom the mist of darkness is reserved for ever" (2 Peter 2:13-17).

"Woe unto them! for they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Core. These are spots in your feasts of charity, when they feast with you, feeding themselves without fear: clouds they are without water, carried about of winds; trees whose fruit withereth, without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots; Raging waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame; wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever" (Jude 1:11-13).

The parallels between these two passages are amazing. Both reveal that Balaam did this iniquity for the love of money. Both passages declare that those who are practicing the doctrine of Balaam are doing so not only by attending pagan feasts with their ritual prostitution, but are bringing these practices into the feasts of the Lord's people, the Lord's Supper. These were feasts at which the

¹ Dr. William Smith's Dictionary of the Bible, Houghton, Mifflin And Company, Boston, 1883, p. 2146.

special gifts of the Holy Spirit in the Apostolic Church were likely to be prominently exercised. Is corrupting the Spirit filled ordinances of God with fornication and demonic worship blasphemy against the Holy Spirit? Both speak of Balaam and his disciples that they are eternally damned; that for them is reserved, "*the blackness of darkness for ever*". For such there does not appear to be the possibility of salvation. Have they committed the unpardonable sin? Did Balaam commit the unpardonable sin? Again the elements are certainly there, willful and extreme sins of nearness by one who had been a "*partaker of the Holy Ghost*". Only the Lord knows absolutely but we can certainly conjecture that it might well have been so.

There are many other candidates for the dubious distinction of being recorded with such infamy in the sacred history that they may have committed the unpardonable sin. They range from Doeg the Edomite, who slew the priests of God, to Judas Iscariot, who sold the Lord Jesus Christ for thirty pieces of silver. But the final one I will propose is the Anti-Christ. Of him we read,

"Now we beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, That ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God" (2 Thessalonians 2:1-4).

The description of his activities above certainly fulfill all the requirements for willful and blasphemous sins of nearness in the extreme. Being called the "*Son of perdition*" also labels him as one who is already condemned to eternal damnation and beyond the possibility of salvation. Now although this might be simply an inspired statement identifying him as being a reprobate by the election of God from before the foundation of the world, it seems to imply more. He is not simply a reprobate but the reprobate, the "*Son of perdition*". And his sin seems to parallel the sin of Satan and the fallen angels.

"How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit" (Isaiah 14:12-15).

Christ as a second Adam came and in the incarnation assumed a human nature and died for the sins of human nature. Satan and his demons are angelic beings and not human. Therefore for them there is no atonement; there is no Mediator; there is no salvation. For them there is no possibility of salvation. All of their sins are unpardonable. The Anti-Christ's sin may be too.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS

What is an imprecation? It is a curse. What are the imprecatory psalms? They are psalms in which the author petitions God to curse the wicked. They are prayers for God, in his uprightness and holiness, to curse the wicked according to the righteous judgments of his law. The Lord has reserved judgment unto himself. At the latter day he has appointed that all men will be judged by his Son, Jesus Christ. We are forbidden to execute God's judgments. The scriptures say,

"Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord" (Romans 12:19).

But what we can do is to beseech God to execute his vengeance on the wicked that his saints may see justice done. And that is exactly how the psalmist prays,

"O LORD God, to whom vengeance belongeth; O God, to whom vengeance belongeth, show thyself. Lift up thyself, thou judge of the earth: render a reward to the proud. LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked triumph? How long shall they utter and speak hard things? and all the workers of iniquity boast themselves? They break in pieces thy people, O LORD, and afflict thine heritage. They slay the widow and the stranger, and murder the fatherless. Yet they say, The LORD shall not see, neither shall the God of Jacob regard it" (Psalm 94:1-7).

Some of these petitions, these prayers, are very explicit, very graphic and detailed. They call on God to rain his wrath and curse down on their enemies and his in specific ways. A couple of examples are,

"Let them be confounded and put to shame that seek after my soul: let them be turned back and brought to confusion that devise my hurt. Let them be as chaff before the wind: and let the angel of the LORD chase them. Let their way be dark and slippery: and let the angel of the LORD persecute them" (Psalm 35:4-6).

"Pour out thine indignation upon them, and let thy wrathful anger take hold of them. Let their habitation be desolate; and let none dwell in their tents. For they persecute him whom thou hast smitten; and they talk to the grief of those whom thou hast wounded. Add iniquity unto their iniquity: and let them not come into thy righteousness. Let them be blotted out of the book of the living, and not be written with the righteous" (Psalm 69:24-28).

These psalms are a prayer for justice. They are petitions that God would exercise himself as the Moral Governor of the Universe and deal with the wicked according to their works. They acknowledge that in God's scheme of things there is as much a place for justice as there is for mercy. Under God the two are never mutually exclusive but entirely compatible; the one never existing at the expense of the other. For that reason the cross was an absolute necessity; that God's mercy might flow to his elect while his justice remained perfectly satisfied. Unfortunately however these psalms have long posed a problem for many professing Christians. They cannot seem to fit to them into their theology. They seem incompatible with all that they believe. They feel that they are incompatible with the nature of God; that they are incompatible with the gospel of Jesus Christ; that they are incompatible with the rest of scripture; in short that they are incompatible with Christianity.

Ultimately of course it is not what we feel that counts. Christianity is not a religion of feelings with a touchy-feely theology. It is the "religion of the book"; it is the religion that is defined by the scriptures, the word of God.

There have been many proposed solutions to the alleged problem of the imprecatory psalms. The first solution proposed is the evolution of God. Liberal scholars proposed that the harsh and vengeful God of the Old Testament has changed. They state that he has developed into the loving and merciful God of the New Testament. To them the imprecatory psalms are merely the immature feelings of a developing and evolving God. They do not pose a problem because God no longer feels that way. They are not a contradiction to the gospel because God has changed. These psalms do not represent the God of the New Testament. Another way that men have sought to resolve this apparent contradiction is through Dispensationalism. They acknowledge that God in his ultimate and eternal nature has not changed. But they say that the dispensation has changed. They say that God's ways of dealing with men have changed. To them the imprecatory psalms are not a problem. They are merely an expression of God acting as a Judge in a legalistic dispensation. But today we are in dispensation of grace; we are in the age of the Spirit and things have completely changed. For them the imprecatory psalms have no relevance for today. They are no a problem but merely a relic of a bygone dispensation. Another way men have sought to deal with these psalms is by denying their inspiration. One such person was Isaac Watts the well known hymn writer. To him the imprecatory psalms were just the "*sinful thoughts of David*". He essentially denied the inspiration of the book of Psalms. His solution to this "problem" was to rewrite the psalms; to write hymns loosely based on psalms. He could then sit in judgment on God's word and edit it until it was suitable to be sung in the church.

Those committed to the Reformed faith can obviously accept none of the above means for dealing with this alleged problem. We have a God who is eternally the same, "*with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning*" (James 1:17). Our God is "*the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever*" (Hebrews 13:8). Neither can we accept dispensational theories that chop the scriptures up into disjointed sections. We see a series of divine covenants with a continuity that links them all together into one marvelous and eternal plan of salvation. We abhor the concept of a God that has to keep going back to the workshop until he finally gets it right and feel that such ideas are somewhat blasphemous. From the Edenic Covenant of Genesis 3:16, through the Abrahamic Covenant made with believers and their seed and based on justification by faith, to the New Covenant instituted by Christ the night that he was betrayed using the elements of the Passover feast, a sacrament of the Old or the Sinaitic Covenant, we see only continuity as God unfolds his great plan of redemption. Neither can we accept aspersions on the integrity and the inspiration of one jot or tittle of God's word as revealed in scripture.

All these solutions fail miserably to provide a scriptural solution to the alleged dilemma of the imprecatory psalms. As we shall see that is because there is no dilemma. But while there is no real problem with the imprecatory psalms there are very serious problems with all the proposed solutions. If we really study the scriptures we see that the God of the New Testament expresses himself exactly the same as the God of the Old Testament. There is no change. There are many statements of love and mercy in the Old Testament. There are many statements of wrath and implacable judgment in the New Testament. And the proposed dichotomy is only in the imagination of the reader. Christ and the Apostles were constantly teaching and preaching from the Old Testament. All their teachings were constantly being substantiated by quotations from scripture which at the time was exclusively the Old Testament. And in their teaching ministry the Psalms played a prominent part, as the book from which they most often quoted was the Book of Psalms. The New Testament contains

approximately 200 quotations from or allusions to the Psalms. In these the curses of the imprecatory Psalms are certainly not censored out. Imprecations from the Psalms are quoted 40 times in the New Testament by Christ and the Apostles.¹ This is not a dispensational issue. The solution to understanding the nature of these imprecations may lie in an understanding of the Biblical degrees of sin.

As we study the different degrees of sin we see the nature of God's response to each. Sins of wandering are dealt with more patiently. God sees these sinners as sheep without a shepherd. The Scribes and Pharisees, the leadership of the Jewish Church, had grossly misled and confused the people. They were committing many sins as they wandered in ignorance of God's will. Christ wept over them declaring,

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" (Matthew 23:37).

Willful sins are dealt with more sternly. At the beginning of his ministry the people were like sheep without a shepherd and we read, *".....And the common people heard him gladly"* (Mark 12:37). But as the nation under its apostate leadership hardened itself against Jesus and refused to accept him as the Lord's Christ, so does Jesus' sentiments. Since they *"would not!"* he declares, *"Behold, your house is left unto you desolate"* (Matthew 23:38). But God's wrath is provoked even more easily by sins of nearness; whether inadvertent as in Uzzah's case or deliberate as in Achan's, the penalty most often is death and frequently judgment is exercised swiftly, even on the spot. And the sins that most provoke God and precipitate his righteous wrath with no mercy are willful sins in holy things, deliberate desecration of holy things, done in his sight and before his face. Extreme willful sins of nearness are the sins that God hates the most and that he finds most intolerable. And these are exactly the sins that we find described in the imprecatory psalms. These are exactly the sins of those upon whom the Psalmist calls down God's wrath. A brief review of some of the imprecatory psalms will make this clear.

Psalm 35: The Curses:

"Let them be confounded and put to shame that seek after my soul: let them be turned back and brought to confusion that devise my hurt. Let them be as chaff before the wind: and let the angel of the LORD chase them. Let their way be dark and slippery: and let the angel of the LORD persecute them" (Psalm 35:4-6).

Psalm 35: The Causes:

"For without cause have they hid for me their net in a pit, which without cause they have digged for my soul. False witnesses did rise up; they laid to my charge things that I knew not. They rewarded me evil for good to the spoiling of my soul. But in mine adversity they rejoiced, and gathered themselves together: yea, the abjects gathered themselves together against me, and I knew it not; they did tear me, and ceased not: With hypocritical mockers in feasts, they gnashed upon me with their teeth" (Psalm 35:7, 11-12, 15-16).

Psalm 83: The Curses:

¹ These statistics were computed from data in Appendix 3 (Index to Psalm Imprecations) and Appendix 4 (New Testament References to the Psalms) from *War Psalms of the Prince Of Peace*, James E. Adams, Presbyterian And Reformed Publishing Co., Phillipsburg, New Jersey.

"Do unto them as unto the Midianites; as to Sisera, as to Jabin, at the brook of Kison: Which perished at Endor: they became as dung for the earth. O my God, make them like a wheel; as the stubble before the wind. As the fire burneth a wood, and as the flame setteth the mountains on fire; So persecute them with thy tempest, and make them afraid with thy storm. Fill their faces with shame; that they may seek thy name, O LORD. Let them be confounded and troubled for ever; yea, let them be put to shame, and perish: That men may know that thou, whose name alone is JEHOVAH, art the most high over all the earth" (Psalm 83:9-10, 13-18).

Psalm 83: The Causes:

"For, lo, thine enemies make a tumult: and they that hate thee have lifted up the head. They have taken crafty counsel against thy people, and consulted against thy hidden ones. They have said, Come, and let us cut them off from being a nation; that the name of Israel may be no more in remembrance. For they have consulted together with one consent: they are confederate against thee: Who said, Let us take to ourselves the houses of God in possession" (Psalm 83:2-5, 12).

Psalm 69: The Curses:

"Pour out thine indignation upon them, and let thy wrathful anger take hold of them. Let their habitation be desolate; and let none dwell in their tents. For they persecute him whom thou hast smitten; and they talk to the grief of those whom thou hast wounded. Add iniquity unto their iniquity: and let them not come into thy righteousness. Let them be blotted out of the book of the living, and not be written with the righteous" (Psalm 69:24-28)

Psalm 69: The Causes:

"Because for thy sake I have borne reproach; shame hath covered my face. I am become a stranger unto my brethren, and an alien unto my mother's children. For the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up; and the reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon me" (Psalm 69:7-9).

Psalm 109: The Curses:

"Set thou a wicked man over him: and let Satan stand at his right hand. When he shall be judged, let him be condemned: and let his prayer become sin. Let his days be few; and let another take his office. Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow. Let his children be continually vagabonds, and beg: let them seek their bread also out of their desolate places. Let the extortioner catch all that he hath; and let the strangers spoil his labour. Let there be none to extend mercy unto him: neither let there be any to favour his fatherless children. Let his posterity be cut off; and in the generation following let their name be blotted out. Let the iniquity of his fathers be remembered with the LORD; and let not the sin of his mother be blotted out. Let them be before the LORD continually, that he may cut off the memory of them from the earth" (Psalm 109:6-15).

Psalm 109: The Causes:

"For the mouth of the wicked and the mouth of the deceitful are opened against me: they have spoken against me with a lying tongue. They compassed me about also with words of hatred; and fought against me without a cause. For my love they are my adversaries: but I give myself unto prayer. And they have rewarded me evil for good, and hatred for my love. Because that he remembered not to show mercy, but persecuted the poor and needy man, that he might even slay the broken in heart. As he loved cursing, so let it come unto him: as he delighted not in blessing, so let it be far from him. As he clothed himself with cursing like as with his garment, so let it come into his bowels like water, and like oil into his bones" (Psalm 109:2-5, 16-18).

Now the common denominator in the actions of all those upon whom the psalmist heaps his imprecations is that they have a deep and vicious hatred for the things of God. They hate God; they hate his people; they hate his sanctuary; they hate his land. They express in their actions a vicious hatred for the people of God. They desire to destroy the things of God, particularly his people. They want to annihilate his church. And the psalmist cries out like the sanctified souls under the altar in heaven and beseeches God to avenge himself and his saints.

"And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held: And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6:9-10).

The Bible says of God, *".....thou hatest all workers of iniquity"* (Psalm 5:5) and that *"God is angry with the wicked every day"* (Psalm 7:11). As the psalmist sees this hatred of the things of God and all that is holy in his sight he shares in God's hatred of these men. He shares in God's anger with the wicked. The more that one is sanctified by God's Spirit, the more that one is conformed to the image of God in Jesus Christ, the more that one loves God, the more one shares in his feelings about such sin and such sinners. For these are not ordinary sinners. Of the four imprecatory psalms quoted above all but one, the eighty-third, are quoted in the New Testament as referring to Christ. These men are not just wicked men that hate David, the Lord's anointed. David is speaking prophetically of wicked men who hate the Lord's Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One. Two of these psalms are applied to Judas who betrayed Christ and sold him into the hands of wicked men to endure incomprehensible sufferings and the cruel death on the cross. Of such men the psalmist says,

"Surely thou wilt slay the wicked, O God: depart from me therefore, ye bloody men. For they speak against thee wickedly, and thine enemies take thy name in vain. Do not I hate them, O LORD, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee? I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies" (Psalm 139:19-22).

The imprecatory psalms are not just relics of a bygone age, of an inferior dispensation. They are very much for our use and our edification. Some of them express the very words of Christ against his enemies. We are called to sing them and to share in Jesus' petitions to the Father. Are we too "holy" to do that? The question is absurd. To understand these psalms we need to understand the degrees of sin. When we understand the nature of these sins, willful sins of nearness against the holy things of God, particularly against his Son and against his people, then we can understand the sentiments of these psalms and share in them.

CHAPTER TWELVE

DEGREES OF CONSEQUENCES

Again we ask the question; what do these degrees of sin matter? Does it make any real difference or is this just an intellectual study? If all our sins are forgiven in Christ and if the lowest degree of sin if not covered by the blood of Christ can condemn us for all eternity what can these degrees of sin matter? Very much as we shall see. First of all as has already been noted the most extreme degree of the sin, the unpardonable sin, will not be forgiven. That in itself is a significant difference. A sin that places us beyond the possibility of salvation is a serious matter indeed and no ivory tower exercise. But there is much more to consider.

The scriptures teach that our life is but a breath, a vapor, a transient moment. We are compared to a flower of the field or the grass of the meadow. The Apostle James says,

".....For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away" (James 4:14).

And he was but echoing Job in his complaint,

"Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down: he fleeth also as a shadow, and continueth not" (Job 14:1-2).

And these sentiments are reinforced by the psalmist.

"As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; and the place thereof shall know it no more" (Psalm 103:15-16).

What counts is eternity. We can measure our days. We are commanded to do so.

"The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.....So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom" (Psalm 90:10, 12).

But who can measure eternity? Paul says,

"For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Corinthians 4:16-18, 5:1).

If what counts is eternity what we need to consider is our status in the world to come. The scriptures frequently press these concerns upon us. But it is generally in a simple dichotomy; will we be eternally blessed in the kingdom of God and or will we be condemned to everlasting shame and punishment? These two alternatives are constantly set before us with the most solemn warnings. As Jesus taught,

"Enter ye in at the strait gate: for 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" (Matthew 7:13-14).

But there is more to consider than merely where one's destiny will be, where one's spirit will be consigned at death, to heaven or to hell. Our sin has consequences and these consequences exceed merely our eternal destiny. For just as there are degrees of sin so there are degrees of consequences to our sins, not only in this life but also in the life to come. The consequences in this life are more readily apparent. The more one sinks into sin and depravity the more one's life becomes an intolerable mess frequently leading to suicide. On the other hand the more one's life is conformed to God's will and characterized by righteousness, integrity, faithfulness, thrift, honesty, and industry the more in general one will prosper and be established in this world. But what the scriptures also teach is that these consequences pursue us beyond the grave. The scriptures teach that there are degrees of reward as well as degrees of punishment in the world to come.

First of all Christ clearly teaches that there will be degrees of punishment. Speaking of the end of the world and the final judgment he says,

"Be ye therefore ready also: for the Son of man cometh at an hour when ye think not. Then Peter said unto him, Lord, speakest thou this parable unto us, or even to all? And the Lord said, Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his lord shall make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of meat in due season? Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing. Of a truth I say unto you, that he will make him ruler over all that he hath. But and if that servant say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming; and shall begin to beat the menservants and maidens, and to eat and drink, and to be drunken; The lord of that servant will come in a day when he looketh not for him, and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in sunder, and will appoint him his portion with the unbelievers. And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more" (Luke 12:40-48).

First of all we note that the faithful servant will be made a ruler establishing that we will not all be equal in the world to come. There will be a hierarchy of positions and honors based on merit. The fact that this merit is based entirely on the measure of grace and of God's Holy Spirit that we receive in this life does not change the fact that there will be degrees of rewards. Secondly we note that there will be degrees of punishment. The punishments will vary according as the person has committed sins of wandering or sins of a high hand. A clearer passage expressing the fact that the degree of sin we commit in this life will have consequences in the life to come could scarcely be found. Paul confirms this concept in a passage in his letter to the Romans where he also speaks of the final judgment.

"For there is no respect of persons with God. For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law; (For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one

another;) In the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ according to my gospel" (Romans 2:11-16).

Paul says that men will be judged according to the light that they have received. If they had the law, the Old Testament scriptures, they will be judged accordingly. If not they will be judged according to the light they had, the light of creation and conscience etc. God will use what light they had to determine whether their sins were inadvertent or willful and punish them accordingly. This judgment is far deeper than a mere sentence to the place of their eternal abode. God will judge their secrets; he will judge the thoughts and intents of their hearts; he will judge the degree of their sins; and they will receive sentence accordingly. And so the Apostle John teaches.

"And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works" (Revelation 20:12-13).

Men are not received into heaven because of the multitude of their good works. Neither are men consigned to hell because of the multitude or degree of their sins. They stand or fall solely upon the basis of one issue; are their sins covered by the blood of Christ or not? If they are found in Christ, washed in his blood, clothed in his righteousness, then their actions good or bad, matter not as to their eternal destiny. Similarly if they are not in Christ then the number or degree of their sins do not matter; they will spend eternity in the lake of fire. Why then do the books need to be opened? Why then are they judged according to their works? Because although salvation is not by works the degree of punishment in the life to come is and that is what John is teaching here. There is a principle in the law of Moses. The principle states that the punishment should fit the crime. It is expressed as that famous adage,

".....life for life, Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe" (Exodus 21:23-25).

What all these texts are teaching us is that this principle will pursue evildoers even beyond the grave. Punishments in the world to come will be proportionate to the crimes committed. Such is the righteous judgment of God. Not only are there degrees of punishment but also of reward as we have already noted. This is amply illustrated by the parable of the talents.

"He said therefore, A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom, and to return. And he called his ten servants, and delivered them ten pounds, and said unto them, Occupy till I come.....And it came to pass, that when he was returned, having received the kingdom, then he commanded these servants to be called unto him, to whom he had given the money, that he might know how much every man had gained by trading. Then came the first, saying, Lord, thy pound hath gained ten pounds. And he said unto him, Well, thou good servant: because thou hast been faithful in a very little, have thou authority over ten cities. And the second came, saying, Lord, thy pound hath gained five pounds. And he said likewise to him, Be thou also over five cities" (Luke 19:12-13, 15-19).

The parable speaks for itself, and Christ the nobleman when he comes into his kingdom will reward his faithful servants according to their diligence. Christ's kingdom is not some socialist paradise where we will all be equal. These faithful servants will be rulers in the kingdom and will rule over a

specified number of cities according to Christ's appointment. Now this is a parable, not prophecy, but the principle being taught is clear, and whatever one's eschatology it ought to be accepted that there are degrees of honor, authority, and reward in the world to come. The Apostles certainly thought so as the following incident illustrates.

"Then came to him the mother of Zebedee's children with her sons, worshipping him, and desiring a certain thing of him. And he said unto her, What wilt thou? She saith unto him, Grant that these my two sons may sit, the one on thy right hand, and the other on the left, in thy kingdom. But Jesus answered and said, Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They say unto him, We are able. And he saith unto them, Ye shall drink indeed of my cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with: but to sit on my right hand, and on my left, is not mine to give, but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared of my Father" (Matthew 20:20-23).

Now the request may have been ill-advised but it is important to note that Christ does not correct the concept. He denies not that there will be such honors in his kingdom but only states that they will be granted to those whom the Father has appointed to such seats of honor. When Peter asks what rewards they will receive for their faithfulness we note Christ's reply.

"Then answered Peter and said unto him, Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore? And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life" (Matthew 19:27-29).

There are more but these scriptures should be ample to maintain the principle that there will be degrees of both punishment and reward in the Kingdom of God. And this should cast a whole new light on the significance of the degrees of sin we have studied. For all these things will be read from the books and cast into the balances when men stand before the judgment seat of Jesus Christ. This will be true of the Lord's people as well as infidels. Even for us, as Paul warns, there will be a judgment of our deeds in the flesh.

"For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire" (1 Corinthians 3:11-15).

Let us especially take heed, we who can sin against better knowledge. Let us pray the prayer of David to be kept from the great transgression. Let us fear to sin against God and labor that our works may stand the test in that great and glorious day of the Lord.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

The scriptures constantly warn of the deceitfulness of sin. Deceit abounds. Men seduce each other into sin by deceit as Satan did Eve. Men deceive themselves with respect to their favorite sins and justify their own conduct. Then there is the deceitful allure of many temptations. From Christ to Paul we are instructed concerning the deceitfulness of riches. From the nigh impossibility of the salvation of the rich to its love being the root of all evil we are warned about the corrupting power of wealth. One aspect of this deceitfulness is that as men justify and rationalize one sin soon they are justifying what they themselves once condemned. As they harden their hearts and sear their consciences they progress from one sin to another; they progress from one degree of sin to the next. This deceitful progression is a slippery slope. And it is lubricated by the deceitfulness of the human heart and by the Arch-Deceiver himself, Satan. People don't start off with the intention of willfully defying God and overthrowing all moral standards. Men don't consciously plan to wind up willfully provoking God to his face with blasphemous sins of nearness. Young people, as they plan their lives, do not purpose in their hearts to commit the unpardonable sin as they might to win a medal or earn a degree. These are not planned objectives but merely the final destinations of a deceitful process and a slippery slope. A slippery slope that might well be called the slide to perdition.

Fire has been called a fearful servant and a dangerous master. The common proverb says that if you play with fire you will get hurt. But men deceive themselves and think that they can play with fire and not get hurt. Men think that they can use fire for their own purposes but it easily gets out of control and becomes the master. So it is with sin. Men think they can use sin for their own purposes. They think that it will provide shortcuts to the fulfillment of their desires. They think that they are in control; such is the deceitfulness of sin. But Jesus taught,

".....Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin" (John 8:34).

And Peter echoes,

"While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage" (2 Pet 2:19).

This progression in sin is natural. Men may think they are in control but it is an illusion. When men sin sins of wandering they see no problem. But sooner or later they will in God's providence receive some correction. Then there are only two choices before them, repent of the sin or proceed with it. If they do the latter they have now progressed to willful sin. But this is the natural progression unless the grace of God softens the heart and grants it repentance. Men have become used to their sin. They have long ago justified their sin to themselves in their own mind. They see nothing wrong with it. They have assumed that it is their right. When they are corrected they resist. Someone is tampering with their rights. They boldly defend their space and proceed to willful sin, all the time deceiving themselves that they are right. They have been told it is wrong; deep inside they may know it is wrong, but they won't admit it. They rebel against God's law but continue to deceive themselves that their rebellion is right.

A good example of this is the case of Cain at the beginning of history. How little things change. Cain committed a sin by failing to offer the correct sacrifice. We do not know but it may have been a sin of ignorance. We can not be certain that he knew that a blood sacrifice was required. (We can

not be certain that it was required. Some commentators have taken the position that Cain's sin lay elsewhere, such as in the attitude of his heart. After all, later on in the ceremonial law grain offerings were provided for.) Whatever, Cain brought of the fruit of his labors and expected his sacrifice to be respected and received by God. But his sacrifice was rejected and God personally corrected him. And what did Cain do? Did he repent? No, he continued to justify himself. His brother, a preacher of righteousness, sought to correct him. But Cain willfully persevered in his error. He was then in a state of moral rebellion against God. And this state soon manifested itself in a high handed act of murder as he slew God's prophet whose words he would hear no longer. And soon Cain was in trouble. God confronted him and he was driven out as an exile. Cain thought he was in control. He thought he could decide what an appropriate offering was. He thought that sin would serve him and give him control. Instead sin has controlled him and he was driven out no longer in control of even his own life.

There are different variations of this progression. Sometimes one person's sins of wandering can encourage another person to proceed to willful sin in the same matter. The case of Adam and Eve provides a good illustration. We have already examined their sin in some detail. We know from inspired commentary in the New Testament that when Eve partook of the forbidden fruit it was a sin of wandering. She was successfully deceived by Satan. We also know that Adam was not deceived. He understood God's will in the matter and consciously chose to rebel against it. His sin was deliberate and high handed. What we want to look at now is how these two sins are related and how it forms a progression in sin, a type of progression in sin that is still with us today. As Solomon said long ago there is no new thing under the sun. The Genesis account of their fall into sin is succinct. It says,

"And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat" (Genesis 3:6).

The key phrase in this passage tells us that Eve *"did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her"*. Moses is telling us that Adam was with her. Adam was with her when she ate of the forbidden fruit. Adam may even have been standing by during the entire Satanic temptation. The point is though that he watched her eat. He observed her sin of wandering. Adam knew that God had said,

"But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:17).

Adam knew the significance of this prohibition. He understood its requirements. He understood the threatened penalty. But he noted that Eve had eaten and that nothing had happened. This emboldened him. Seeing that Eve had gotten away with eating of the forbidden fruit Adam partook as well. And here we see a progression in sin. Eve's sin of wandering leads to Adam's high handed sin. What Eve did under Satanic delusion Adam does deliberately. And the one sin led to the other. This is a common experience today. This is how peer pressure works. Everybody else is doing it. There is no problem. They're doing it and everything is fine. Why can't we do it? The reason of course is that we know better. For us it would be high handed sin. But the temptation is enormous especially for young people. This is not only a problem when the bad example is set by unbelievers. It is much more dangerous when it is set by professing Christians. When young people under the temptations of youth see other young people from professedly Christian homes doing what they are tempted to do the pressure to conform is immense. When others who attend church appear to do with a clear conscience what they have been taught is wrong young people begin to kick against the

pricks. But if they defy their parents and engage in what they have been forbidden to do they are engaging in willful moral rebellion against God and their parents. This progression in sin is all around us. And it is not just young people. Adults too are influenced by the society around them and the example of other professedly Christian adults. They too can begin to rationalize and do what their parents, their church, and their Bible has always taught them is wrong. Sin is a contagious disease. The statistics of divorce among professing Christians is just one example of the sad testimony to this truth.

The progression can actually go either way with a particular sin. Sins can go from sins of a high hand to sins of wandering as well as the other way around. Take the case of the sin of abortion. As we have noted the actual sinful act is the same in all cases. It is a serious sin, an act of murder. But it can be either a willful sin or a sin of wandering and the progression can go in either direction. Think of a girl back in the 1930's who had an abortion. The practice is universally condemned and totally illegal. No doctor will perform the abortion and all churches unite in declaring it a gross sin. But defiantly the girl seeks out a criminal abortionist and contracts with him to destroy her unborn child. This is a deliberate high-handed sin. It is murder in the first degree. But now move the scene up to the 1990's. A girl of high school age from a "nice" family gets pregnant. Somewhat ashamed and not willing to face her parents she sees the guidance counselor at school. There she is advised that a pregnancy will derail her education and destroy her future and is counseled to consider an abortion. Her parents find out anyway. They are mortified at the thought of the shame and concerned for her future and not wanting to have to support a baby they insist that she do the sensible thing and have an abortion. She therefore sees a doctor who assures her that the "procedure" is perfectly normal. He assures her that it is totally safe and attempting to put her concerns at rest he tells her that the fetus is not a person but only a small biomass with "potential" life. Still somewhat unsure and feeling the life within her she goes to see her pastor. Her family has its church membership in a large, liberal, mainline Protestant denomination. Her pastor assures her that abortion is perfectly acceptable and that there is nothing immoral about it. He tells her that it is her choice and that God will understand what she needs to do. The girl goes ahead and has an abortion. It is a sin of wandering. What was once clearly a high handed sin even for unbelievers can in an age of apostasy and spiritual ignorance become an inadvertent sin. But this is not progress in the real sense. It is further decline. Most sins are sins of ignorance. When abortion was a high handed sin it was rare. Now that it has become accepted and defended at all levels of society abortions are carried out by the millions every year. Such is the terrible progress of sin.

And the progression can continue. As abortion becomes more common the resistance against it rises. Testimony to its wickedness rises on all sides. This testimony is often so prevalent it is hard to escape. It may be supported by medical evidence exploding the "scientific myths" supporting the abortion industry. A significant number of persons are now confronted with this moral and scientific evidence as they consider abortion. They then have a choice. They can receive the correction and desist from this sin or they can harden their hearts and proceed in the face of the truth. As this happens we progress again in wickedness. We started with a few willful sins, progressed to millions of sins of ignorance, and then continued on to a state of massive sinful rebellion against God on this issue.

Such is the progression in the degrees and quantity of sin. There are other progressions too. Men progress from sins of wandering to high handed sins. Then they are emboldened in their sin and progress to sins of nearness. From willfully sinning they go to willfully sinning in God's presence, before his face. Finally they can progress to the ultimate sin of nearness, the unpardonable sin. Such is the slippery slope of sin. Such is the slide to perdition.

Saul, Israel's first king, is a good example of just such a progression in sin. He started off so well and came to such a terrible end. What a lesson in the deceitfulness of sin. What a warning about the perils of the slide to perdition. Saul certainly seems to start off well. We first find him humbly and obediently doing a difficult chore for his father; searching the land for some missing donkeys. His humility is demonstrated again by his response to Samuel at their first meeting,

"And Saul answered and said, Am not I a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel? and my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? wherefore then speakest thou so to me?" (1 Samuel 9:21).

He faithfully obeys all of Samuel's instruction at that meeting. When he is anointed and then crowned king of Israel his virtues again show themselves. When some "*children of Belial*" mocked his kingship and "*despised him*", "*he held his peace*" (1 Samuel 10:27). This shows remarkable humility as well as restraint and wisdom. Saul had a good start. Such a man is a sinner but is most likely to be committing sins of wandering. These are not the characteristics of a willful sinner in moral rebellion against God. But he soon proceeds to willful sins in the matter of the unauthorized sacrifice and the destruction of Amalek. These were high handed sins of nearness and Saul continues in these sins. He winds up seeking to murder the Lord's anointed, David, a type of Christ. This is a severe sin of nearness; it is open rebellion against the Lord as he seeks the life of him whom God has chosen as his successor. This is an extreme sin of nearness as he lifts up his hand against the Lord's representative, the Lord's anointed, the type of the Lord's Christ. This is followed by what may have been blasphemy against the Holy Spirit; seeking out the witch at Endor and forsaking the counsel of God. His final act in this life was to end it by his own hand. David may mourn and say, "*how are the mighty fallen!*" but Saul was no longer a mighty man. Forsaken of God and tormented by his sin he was only a shadow of his former self. It was not the Philistines that caused Saul's death. It was his sin that destroyed him. A more frightful example of the slide to perdition can scarcely be imagined, unless it be the example of the arch-traitor Judas.

Judas is another example of those who started off well but whose slide to perdition is a shocking testimony to the depravity of the human heart and the power and deceitfulness of sin. He was a follower of Christ. He was one of the twelve. He was commissioned to preach the gospel and went forth at the command of Christ. He cast out demons and performed miracles of healing. As the nation and its leadership turned against Christ he remained faithful for a time. But he became a thief and stole from the common purse. Possibly he deceived himself that this was his right. He was only taking a little salary for all his labors. Like Eve his sin at that point may not have been willful. As we have noted before we really cannot tell; only the Lord knows the heart. But this sin led to other sins. When shortly before his death Christ was anointed with an extremely costly ointment Judas' comment was,

"Then saith one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, which should betray him, Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor? This he said, not that he cared for the poor; but because he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein" (John 12:4-6).

Christ strongly defended the woman's actions and thus by implication rebuked Judas. Two of the evangelists noted Judas' immediate reaction to this incident.

"Then one of the twelve, called Judas Iscariot, went unto the chief priests, And said unto them, What will ye give me, and I will deliver him unto you? And they covenanted with him for thirty pieces of silver. And from that time he sought opportunity to betray him" (Matthew 26:14-16).

It seems that his sin of stealing led him to the sin of betrayal. He was obviously greedy for the money this ointment represented. When people steal from their employer after a while they deceive themselves that they are owed it; that they have a right to it. Judas may have felt that way. When he was denied this opportunity of theft and rebuked for his comments his reaction was to go to the chief priests and bargain to betray Jesus. His petty larceny and his lies had now driven him to go and commit the most infamous crime in history. Indeed it is a slippery slope. But Christ gave him one more opportunity to arrest his slide and turn back from what may have been an unpardonable sin.

"And as they did eat, he said, Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me. And they were exceeding sorrowful, and began every one of them to say unto him, Lord, is it I? And he answered and said, He that dippeth his hand with me in the dish, the same shall betray me. The Son of man goeth as it is written of him: but woe unto that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! it had been good for that man if he had not been born. Then Judas, which betrayed him, answered and said, Master, is it I? He said unto him, Thou hast said" (Matthew 26:21-25).

Judas is warned. Judas is exposed. But Judas remains Judas. He remains a thief and a traitor. He hardens his heart and proceeds in his infamy. He will not repent of what he has purposed in his heart and he continues in his slide to perdition. And what a terrible slide it is. What starts as petty larceny leads to crimes that torment him to the point of self destruction as he perishes like Saul by his own hand. What can we possibly add to these examples? What can better illustrate the deceitfulness of sin? What can better set forth that slide to perdition that seems to start so innocently and, working its way through the degrees of sin, brings men to destruction in this life and eternal torments in the life to come?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE RESTRAINER

Man is a sinner. Therefore he needs restraint. Even as law breaking criminals need to be restrained so do sinners who are transgressing the law of God. The ultimate restraint is when sinners will be incarcerated in the lake of fire for all eternity. But no restraint can stop sinful men from sinning. Even the sinners now in hell continue to sin. Their lack of repentance toward God and their continued unwillingness to love God with all their heart, with all their mind, and with all their strength, constitutes ongoing sin and necessitates ongoing punishment. They are restrained only in that they cannot act out their sinful desires and cannot fulfill their sinful lusts in the deeds of the flesh. Even so no restraint can be fully effective in this life.

God has provided a number of restraints. He has given man knowledge of his law and he has given all men a conscience. But initially the primary restrainer was God himself. It was God who personally warned Adam and Eve of the consequences of eating of the forbidden fruit and it was God himself who enforced the command when they broke it. Similarly it was God who personally confronted Cain with respect to the sin of his sacrifice and God personally dealt with Cain to avenge his brother's blood that cried out to him from the ground. But as man's wickedness increased to almost universal open defiance of God and his law, as Lamech did, God's restraint resulted in a world wide flood that almost exterminated the human race. After the flood God's covenant with Noah included a promise to never destroy the world again by water and to preserve the world until the end of the age. To help ensure the no such universal judgment would again be necessary God provided an additional restraint; God instituted civil government.

Today many governments seek to be positive institutions. They are engaged in providing food, clothing, housing, and medical care for many or all of their citizens. They are involved in a host of positive programs. This is not reflective of the government that God instituted. Government is designed to be a negative institution. It was ordained of God as an institution to punish and restrain sin. As Paul states it,

"For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil" (Romans 13:4).

This is an additional restraint upon the sinfulness of men. If they do not fear God they will at least fear the government. Again as Paul states it,

"Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake" (Romans 13:5).

What Paul is saying is that Christians should obey civil government because it is ordained of God and not just because they fear the sword. For the ungodly however, who have no fear of God, who have seared their consciences, there is only the fear of the sword. This is the restraint that keeps the world from breaking out into such a tidal wave of sin that another universal judgment would be required. This is what keeps many of the ungodly from crimes such as theft, murder, rape etc. And before they were decriminalized it was the threat of civil penalties that inhibited acts of adultery and sodomy. In this present world, among the ungodly, it is civil government that is the great restrainer. The Biblical

record confirms this view by both precept and example. In both Abraham's and Isaac's day we see the civil governments of Egypt and Philistia acting to restrain sin.

"And Abimelech called Isaac, and said, Behold, of a surety she is thy wife: and how saidst thou, She is my sister? And Isaac said unto him, Because I said, Lest I die for her. And Abimelech said, What is this thou hast done unto us? one of the people might lightly have lien with thy wife, and thou shouldest have brought guiltiness upon us. And Abimelech charged all his people, saying, He that toucheth this man or his wife shall surely be put to death" (Genesis 26:9-11).

Abimelech certainly acted effectively as a restraint on sin in the community under his authority. And this is the Biblical pattern. The days of the judges were marked by a lack of restraint. The constant complaint of the book as it sums up the recurring tragedies of Israel's early history as a nation state is,

"In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

Israel kept wandering into ignorance and idolatry as exemplified by the story of Micah. There had been no effective restraint since the days of Joshua.

"And Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that overlived Joshua, and which had known all the works of the LORD, that he had done for Israel" (Joshua 24:31).

With Joshua's demise came the demise of strong and effectual leadership in Israel and therefore the end of effective restraint on the sinful tendencies of the people. Many of the judges exercised only local authority and none had the stature of a Moses or a Joshua. The destructive nepotism of Eli who tolerated his wicked sons in positions of high authority weakened the authority of the judges. When Samuel's sons behaved wickedly the nation demanded a king; they wanted a strong central government. God chose Saul and said of him,

"And when Samuel saw Saul, the LORD said unto him, Behold the man whom I spake to thee of! this same shall reign over my people" (1 Samuel 9:17).

In the Hebrew the word for reign does not mean to rule. It is "*atsar*" and means to enclose and therefore by analogy to hold back or restrain.¹ Saul was anointed King over Israel that he might restrain them; that he might hold them within the enclosure bounded by God's law. At first Saul was a good restrainer. First he restrained the Philistines when they invaded the land. Then he restrained all the Sodomites and the mediums etc. and practically eliminated them from the land. Saul started off being what God wanted a King to be. Later on Saul himself required restraint. The people had to restrain him from unjustly executing his own son Jonathan. Only God's providence restrained him from executing David, the Lord's anointed.

God instituted civil government to restrain sin so that his righteous judgment would not again require a universal outpouring of his wrath before the appointed time of the end of the world; so that God's plan could be fulfilled, the Messiah come, the elect all be called out, the wheat and tares allowed to

¹ Again I am indebted for this insight to James Jordan. It is contained in issue No. 44 of Biblical Horizons, P.O. Box 1096, Niceville, Florida 32588-1096, dated December 1992. I would have quoted the passage but the copyright requires the reprinting of the article in its entirety.

ripen together. But what will happen at the end of the age? We are told what it will be like. Christ compares it to the generation of the flood.

"But as the days of Noah were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, And knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be" (Matthew 24:37-39).

"Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot; they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; But the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all. Even thus shall it be in the day when the Son of man is revealed" (Luke 17:28-30).

This comparison is not only in the suddenness and the scope of God's judgment on that generation but also in their wickedness. As Paul tells Timothy,

"This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, Without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, Traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God" (2 Timothy 3:1-4).

Now what is common to both generations is the unparalleled unrestrained universal wickedness. Where is the restraint? The generation of the flood had no civil government but what of the generation at the end of the age? Again Paul gives us the key.

"Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; Who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God. Remember ye not, that, when I was yet with you, I told you these things? And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming: Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders" (2 Thessalonians 2:3-9).

Paul says that "*the mystery of iniquity*", the conspiracy of Anti-Christ, that will produce the degenerate generation of the last days, is already active in his day. He also says that something is preventing it from consummating its design and will continue to prevent it until it is removed. What is this something? The word "*let*" is old Elizabethan English. It means to prevent. The Greek word is "*katecho*" and means to hold down. This comes out more clearly in a contemporary translation

"For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way" (2 Thessalonians 2:7 NKJV).

What is it that is restraining the outbreak of lawlessness that will characterize the last days? The answer is civil government. When civil government ceases to provide any restraint to the lawlessness of sinful men we will produce the generation upon whom will rain the judgments of the last days, days that the Bible calls the days of vengeance. We already see this tendency in our day. Constantly

our government is legalizing that which is sinful and removing all restraint against particular sins. Governments are going even further and are actively encouraging the commission of certain sins. By its welfare policies and by the marriage penalty in the tax code the government is encouraging fornication. By its crusade for gay rights and gay acceptance government is actively encouraging Sodomites in their sin. By their operation of lotteries governments are encouraging the vice of gambling. Programs such as clean needle exchanges and distribution of free condoms encourage drug addiction and other sinful vices. The virtual abolition of the Biblical death penalty has certainly encouraged murderers and rapists. Clearly the effective restraint is melting away before our eyes. But we are blessed that there is still sufficient restraint to allow the Lord's people to lead peaceable and godly lives. We are not yet like Lot in Sodom. But when all restraint has been removed and we are all in Lot's shoes then we like him can await that judgment from heaven which will come in the last days.

What is the importance of all this? There are many governments and consequently many restraints. There is the government of God and his restraint on sin by his providential dealings with men as well as through the testimony of his law and their consciences. There is self-government; self discipline that men exercise to restrain their own sinful passions. There is family government that disciplines the children, restraining them from sin, and habituating them to walk in the paths of righteousness. There is civil government and finally also ecclesiastical government. The latter disciplines the Lord's people, teaching them, counseling them, correcting them, admonishing, rebuking, and even excommunicating them as necessary to restrain sin among the Lord's people. Obviously the more self government men exercise, the more effective family government is, and the more widespread Biblical church government exists, the less restraint will have to come from the civil government. This is one of the reasons for the vast increase we have seen in the size and the scope of government. As society degenerates morally the prime restraint becomes the sword of the civil magistrate; as men continually invent new forms of sin the government is constantly expanding the scope of its activities; as has been said men will be ruled by God or ruled by a dictator. The blessings of limited government as America once had are limited to a godly people who require minimal civil restraint.

The restraint exercised by the civil magistrate works in two ways. First of all there is a suppression of willful sin. He is a terror to evildoers as Paul says. They fear the sword. They want to sin even though they know it is wrong but they are restrained by the threat of civil retribution. This basically suppresses the criminal class and any would be criminals, but these are generally a small portion of the population. The second mode by which the civil magistrates suppress sin is by teaching. When you pass a law prohibiting some activity you are essentially saying that that activity is wrong. In spite of the liberal shibboleth, "*You can't legislate morality*", every law that is enacted is an attempt to do exactly that, to legislate morality. The vast majority of the sins that are committed are sins of wandering. The law erects walls and barriers to prevent these sins of ignorance. It says No, thou shalt not; and the sheep are guided within the confines of the law. Only a class of hardened, willful sinners will now proceed to perform this prohibited activity. For most of society this sin has been effectively restrained. Without this restraint sin will soon abound and it will not stop with a bumper crop of sins of wandering. Soon the progressions of sin we have previously noted will be in full bloom. One can see what a blessing Biblical civil government can be to a nation.

We have already seen what a blessing leaders like Moses and Joshua were. All the days of Joshua there was effective restraint and the people walked in the ways of the Lord. We are told that all the days of Jehoiada, Jehoash the King walked in the ways of the Lord.

"In the seventh year of Jehu Jehoash began to reign; and forty years reigned he in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Zibiah of Beersheba. And Jehoash did that which was right in the sight of the LORD all his days wherein Jehoiada the priest instructed him" (2 Kings 12:1-2).

What a blessing indeed. A blessing that we should earnestly pray for and diligently labor towards; that we might be ruled in the fear of the Lord by godly men.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PERFECTIONISM AND JUDGMENTALISM

Previously we have asked the question, "of what importance is an understanding of the Biblical degrees of sin?" Our earlier discussions have already sought to answer that question. It will now be answered even more explicitly by showing the disastrous results of misunderstanding these things. In this chapter we will examine a couple of errors that result from confusion with respect to the degrees of sin.

The first error we will deal with is a serious one, the heresy of perfectionism. What is perfectionism? It is the heresy that one can achieve sinless perfection in this life. Orthodox theology teaches that our justification whereby we are legally declared righteous before God on the basis of the merits of Christ's atonement, is the work of a moment; the moment that we are by faith united to Jesus Christ. But it also teaches that our sanctification, the process by which we are actually made holy, is progressive throughout our lives and not completed until death when we enter into the presence of God. The perfectionists taught that by a second act of faith subsequent to our justification men could achieve instant and total sanctification and live without sin in this life. This heresy has been thoroughly analyzed and refuted by Warfield in his book, "Perfectionism". A few quotes from that work will give us an understanding of the nature of this heresy.

"They defined the content of the law, obedience to which constitutes perfection, as just "love"To be perfect, he does not require to love as God loves.....He only requires to love as he himself, being what he is, and in the condition in which he finds himself, can love".¹

"His obligation is limited by his ability.....The moral idiot.....is as perfect as God is: being a moral idiot, he has no moral obligation; when he has done nothing at all he has done all that he ought to do: he is perfect. God himself cannot do more than all he ought to do".²

"Obligation here is interpreted in terms of ability with the result that each man becomes a law unto himself, creating his own law; while the objective law of God, the standard of holiness in all, is annulled, and there are as many laws, as many standards of holiness, as there are moral beings".³

".....he pushes the principle to such an extreme as to adjust them in detail to the moral capacity of each individual sinner, all the way down to moral idiocy; with the effect of making our sin the excuse for our sin, until we may cease to be sinners altogether by simply becoming sinful enough".⁴

"Finney tells us that "entire sanctification does not imply the same degree of faith" in everybody....."we cannot believe anything about God of which we have no evidence or knowledge," and therefore, "entire sanctification implies...nothing more than the heart's faith or confidence in all the truth that is perceived by the intellect."⁵

¹ Perfectionism, Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1974, p. 68

² Ibid, pp. 69-70

³ Ibid, p. 70

⁴ Ibid, p. 71

⁵ Ibid, p. 86

*"He who does all he can (being what he is) is as perfect as God himself. On this ground he declares that: "Perfection in a heathen would imply much less faith than in a christian. Perfection in an adult would imply much more and greater faith than in an infant. And perfection in an angel would imply much greater faith than in a man, just in proportion as he knows more of God than man." Our attention is attracted for the moment by the suggestion that perfection is conceivable in a heathen. This is not a slip. Finney fully means it. "The heathen" he explains, "are not under obligation to believe in Christ, and thousands of other things of which they have no knowledge." Not being under obligation to believe in Christ, of course, they can be perfect without believing in him."*⁶

Now there are number of confusing errors in this strange doctrine as Warfield has reviewed it for us. And as Warfield points out there are the typical Pelagian errors of free will and natural ability. But there is much more. I would like to add to Warfield's analysis to point out that a fundamental problem with Finney's thinking is an error with respect to the degrees of sin. What Finney is doing is simply dumbing down the requirements for perfection. He redefines it as simply doing the best we can given the state of our being and our moral capabilities. To be perfect is not to be "Superman" but simply to, as stated in the current United States Army recruitment commercials, "Be all you can be". But when he gets into the nuts and bolts of this Finney relates moral ability to knowledge. Finney teaches that sanctification, like justification, is by faith but goes on to postulate that you can't believe what you don't know. Therefore perfect sanctification only requires perfect faith in what you do know. In the ultimate example of the heathen Finney is perfectly consistent. The heathen do not know of Christ therefore they cannot believe on him. And since in their ignorance they have no ability to believe on him therefore they have no obligation to believe on Christ and can achieve perfection without faith in Christ. Is it not amazing how men can cling to their heretical errors no matter where the logical consequences of that error relentlessly lead them!

But what we have here is an issue regarding the degrees of sin. What Finney is teaching is that sins of wandering are not sins at all! According to his theory of sanctification we have no obligation to keep laws of which we have no knowledge. For him ignorance of the law is a perfect excuse. In his theology sins of ignorance are a logical impossibility. Finney puts the lie to Moses who prescribed specific sacrifices to atone for sins of ignorance. Finney puts the lie to David who under inspiration prayed to be cleansed from "*secret faults*". Finney has defined a false perfection by justifying that which God condemns, by declaring sinless that which God has judged as sin. In Finney's theology only willful sin is actually sin; he has defined away the entire first degree of sin. The case of the moral perfection of the heathen is now perfectly clear. The heathen knows nothing of Christ so it is impossible for him to have committed the sin of willfully rejecting Christ. The heathen knows absolutely nothing of God's law so he cannot possibly have willfully broken it. So, voila, not only a morally perfect heathen but one who is beyond the possibility of sinning. Of course to have no knowledge of God and his law he has to be totally blind to the testimony of the creation and he has to have totally seared and silenced his conscience. In other words he has to be a totally wicked heathen; and this wickedness now enables Finney to define him to be as morally perfect as God!!! If Finney had but accepted the scriptural testimony regarding sins of ignorance, inadvertent breaches of God's law, then his whole theological edifice of perfectionism would have been impossible.

The second error we will look at is judgmentalism. What I have termed judgmentalism is an error in how we judge others. But first of all we must deal with another error that states we are not even to judge others. The shibboleth of this error is a verse taken out of context which says,

⁶ Ibid, pp. 86-87

"Judge not, that ye be not judged" (Matthew 7:1).

Contrary to popular misconception this is not a prohibition against judging others as the following verse makes more clear.

"For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again" (Matthew 7:2).

Rather what it is is a warning: a warning that we will be judged by the same standard that we used to judge others. The implication is that we are to judge others by the same standard that God will use to judge us. And this is what we are explicitly taught elsewhere in scripture,

"Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment" (John 7:24).

God does not judge by appearance and neither are we. God judges righteous judgment according to his law and so must we. We are not forbidden to judge; we are only forbidden to judge in a wrong way. Even as in the Lord's Prayer we are taught that we are to forgive others in exactly the same way as God forgives us; so are we here taught to judge others in the same way and by the same standards as God judges. Like God, we are commanded to judge; we are commanded to judge righteous judgment.

Now how does God judge us? God judges righteous judgment. What does that mean? Righteous means according to the law, which means that God judges us according to his law. And that is how we are to judge. We are to judge all things according to the standard of God's law. When we fail to do that we are not judging righteous judgment. Let me give an example. Imagine the analogy of a traffic situation. I am in a hurry. I want to speed. But there is a car ahead of me that is holding me up. This vehicle is actually sticking to the speed limit. I am incensed. I begin to judge this person. I call him a slowpoke. I say, "What an idiot!" "No one drives the speed limit". "He's holding up traffic". "Who does he think he is?" "He doesn't own the road." "Get out of my way!!!" Now I am definitely judging but I am not judging righteous judgment. I am not judging according to the law. The law says thou shalt not speed and I am condemning this person for obeying the law. Now the above example may appear silly but that is what we frequently do. Sometimes another Christian's faithful adherence to God's law makes our lack of compliance look bad. Maybe we've become comfortable breaking the Sabbath to suit our own pleasures or we have justified ourselves in some other sin. Someone else's strict compliance will offend us. We react negatively and judge that person. "Who does he think he is?, Mr. Self-Righteous?" "What a stick-in-the-mud". "He must think he's really holy". Again we are not judging righteous judgment. We are not judging according to God's law. Examples are legion. Just reflect on how many people react when they are corrected in their sins by their pastor or by the elders of the church. It takes a lot of grace to subject oneself to scriptural correction and judge oneself righteously. Most people begin to unrighteously judge their pastor and elders. They denounce the elders and the church and seek a more "loving" church fellowship elsewhere. If they are accepted elsewhere then that church has also failed to judge righteous judgment.

But there is another aspect to God's righteous judgment. God judges us according to the thoughts and intents of the heart. God's judgment differentiates between sins of wandering and willful sins. God's judgement differentiates between sins committed far from God's presence and sins of nearness that are done in his special presence to provoke him to his face. This is not situation ethics any more than differentiating between first, second, and third degree murder is situation ethics. It simply is a much

more heinous crime to premeditate to kill in cold blood than it is to accidentally commit manslaughter. It is simply a far more wicked thing to enter God's sanctuary and willfully defy his moral law than it is to sin in ignorance. God's law recognizes these distinctions, and God's righteous judgment judges according to these distinctions. And our judgement must also be according to these distinctions.

In real life however men generally fail to judge others according these distinctions. Now it is true that it is hard for us to do so. Unlike God we cannot read the heart. But we ought to be charitable in our judgments and not assume the worst. We ought to give men the benefit of any reasonable doubt. Paul teaches this in his famous chapter on love. He says,

"Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:4-7 NKJV).

Love according to Paul is long suffering. It is not easily provoked. And particularly it thinks no evil. And this is what we do when we think the worst of people and assume that all their offenses against us are willful and deliberate attacks on our person. To do so is to think evil of them and this Paul forbids. It is this tendency to condemn all sins against us as willful that I have, for lack of a better term, entitled judgmentalism.

Let us take an example. Again to use the traffic analogy, imagine that someone has just been cut off by another driver. What is the typical reaction? Anger! Men assume that it was a willful act and react accordingly. In point of fact it may literally have been a sin of wandering; the vehicle wandered into the other vehicle's path inadvertently. The other driver just made an error; either an error in judgment or in failing to see the other vehicle at all. But men don't naturally think in terms of distinguishing between these degrees of sin when they are sinned against. They are offended and assume the worst; they assume that they have been willfully sinned against. Righteous judgment would require the exercise of a little Christian charity and forbearance. Righteous judgment would regard it as an inadvertent error and shrug it off. God deals more patiently with sins of wandering than he does with willful sins, and so should we. God warns that we will be judged with the same measure that we used to judge others. If we judge our fellow men as if all their sins are willful then God warns that he will judge us the same way. We have to be careful how we judge one another. Parents especially need to be careful how they judge their children. God deals with us as children and is patient with our sins of wandering. Similarly we have to be patient with the shortcomings of our children. Harsh judgments that are intended to curb sins of willful disobedience heaped on a child that is doing its best to please the parent are extremely destructive. Is that how we want God to deal with us?

We can see from all the above how important it can be to properly understand the degrees of sin. We have seen what grievous errors and destructive behaviors can result from confusion on this subject. This is just one more reason to carefully and prayerfully study this matter. As the psalmist says,

"Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee" (Psalm 119:11).

Let that be our example that we may do likewise.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CONCLUSION

Men have long maintained that sin is a slippery slope. The scriptural warnings about the deceitfulness of sin have long rung from the pulpits of the land. But it is an understanding of the degrees of sin that is the key to the real nature of that slide to perdition. And these warnings are not just for the ungodly but these truths are particularly important for the Lord's people. With our greater knowledge and understanding of God's will; with our specific knowledge of God's holiness and God's judgments, comes greater responsibility. We, of all people, will be held to account first when the reckoning comes. As the scriptures say,

"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).

This is because the sins of the Lord's people are generally of a higher degree. Being enlightened by the word of God more of our sins are likely to be willful sins, committed in spite of better knowledge. Again there is a slippery slope, a particular progression that leads us into such sins. As our society becomes less and less godly, and as our culture becomes more and more wicked, sins that once were rare, high handed sins become common. They become generally accepted practices that nobody thinks twice about. This makes it much easier for even the Lord's people to harden their hearts against the seriousness of these sins and how offensive they are to God. As these sins become accepted and commonplace it becomes easier for even professing Christians to contemplate doing that which was once unthinkable. Divorce statistics among evangelical Christians are a good case in point. After a while it becomes harder and harder to tell the church from the world. But what may be prevalent sins of wandering in the general population may be high handed sins for Christians. By copying the ungodly in their practices and participating in the corruption of our culture they have actually leap-frogged the wicked on the slide to perdition. Their sin is of a higher degree. This is one reason why judgment begins at the house of God!

But there is another reason also. And that is that Christians are in a better position to commit sins of nearness. Now it is true that the wicked can also commit sins of nearness. They can openly mock and blaspheme the living God. Goliath did this when he defied the armies of the living God, of the God of Armies. Rabshakeh did this when he blasphemed God before the walls of Jerusalem, the City of the Lord, and mocked the very idea that the Lord God of Israel could save the city from the Assyrians. But it is Christians who come weekly into God's sanctuary to seek his face. It is Christians who regularly have to examine themselves, confess their sins, and come to fellowship with God at the sacramental meal of the Lord's Supper. It is Christians who have to be most on guard against sins of nearness. Take the current avalanche of sexual sin. Fornication, adultery, and even sodomy have all been practically decriminalized. Motion pictures and television constantly portray these activities as normal and acceptable. Not only do the heroes and heroines of the screen regularly indulge in these activities but the personal lives of the actors and actresses reflect more of the same. But what happens when Christians take the bait and fall into these sins? Not only are they committing willful sins but frequently sins of nearness. We have already noted Paul's argument that fornication in a Christian can involve making the members of Christ into the members of a harlot and into a desecration of the temple of the Holy Spirit. And what if a Christian is committing adultery with his neighbor's wife? And what if they both are professing Christians and members of the same church? And what if they cast knowing and lustful glances at each other when they sit in God's sanctuary? And what if they plan their next sexual tryst while they are at God's house? And what if,

God forbid, they sit at the table of the Lord while engaged in this sinful relationship? The sins of a harlot or of the most profligate Hollywood actress would pale in comparison. God is not mocked. As Nathan told David when he fell into such sin,

"Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die" (2 Samuel 12:14).

It was not just David's sin per se. It was not just the adultery and the murder. David was the Lord's anointed. As King he represented God to the people. He brought Bathsheba to the court where he ruled as the Lord's anointed. In the shadow of the throne of David on which the Messiah will sit forevermore he committed adultery. While seated on that throne he plotted the death of Uriah. Such sins of nearness made David's sin far worse than if committed by some pagan monarch. David had polluted God's throne and caused even the ungodly to mock God's holy nation. Similarly Paul warns the Jews concerning their sins while professing to be the people of God,

"Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God? For the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you, as it is written" (Romans 2:23-24).

What are only sins of wandering in the ungodly can become high handed sins of nearness when committed by God's people. Christians therefore ought to be most on guard against sin. Their progression into sin is far more easily compounded.

Another matter that needs to be considered is confession of sin. Again this is not generally a concern for the ungodly. They often don't even know that what they have done is sin and if they knew they probably would not be overly concerned about it. But for Christians confession of sin is important, and it is twofold. First of all it is toward God whose laws we have broken and secondly it is to our neighbor whom we may have sinned against. God requires confession of our sin as part of that repentance that is to precede forgiveness. As John states it,

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Now while confession of sin is important it is simply a fact that it is far easier to confess our sins of wandering. You might ask how can we confess sin that we are not aware of? How can we confess sins of ignorance? Well there are two ways. First in general confession of sin. We confess our sinfulness before God. We acknowledge that we have fallen short in all things. We know that we have failed to please God; we have not served him and worshipped him as we ought; we have failed to serve him with the zeal, and diligence, and the holiness that he requires. We confess our sinful state before him even though we know that we are so blind to our sin that we are still unaware of the specifics of many of our transgressions. Secondly we confess our sins of wandering when they come to our notice either by receiving correction or by our further study and deeper understanding of God's word and will. Now it is relatively easy to confess our sins of wandering; after all they were only inadvertent errors. We can minimize the seriousness of our sin and it is easy to make our excuses. We didn't know any better. We can show how good we are and how tender our consciences are by confessing these sins of the lowest degree. It is much harder to confess our willful sin. We have not even the appearance of an excuse. We stand naked before God and have to condemn ourselves. We stand exposed as the wicked and willful sinners that we are. We far prefer to confess the more "innocent" sins and not have to deal with our wicked and presumptuous transgressions of the laws that God has so graciously revealed to us. It has been so from the beginning. Eve made no attempt

to hide her sin of wandering from Adam. Adam though made every attempt to keep his presumptuous sin hidden from God. David made every attempt to hide his adultery with Bathsheba to the point of committing murder as part of the cover-up. David sought to bury his sin from the sight of God and man until it was all exposed by Nathan the prophet of the Lord. Men will admit a lot of their sins and shortcomings if they have at least a fig leaf to cover them with. A man will admit to losing his temper and failing to exercise patience and be content in God's providence. He can say, "I couldn't help it. I was really provoked". A man may admit to driving recklessly risking lives in violation of the sixth commandment. But he can say, "I was just trying to get there on time and those incompetent drivers ahead of me really upset me". He may admit to cheating on his taxes even though he signed on penalty of perjury and bore false witness. He will say, "Everybody does it and the government just wastes our money anyway". But to confess presumptuous, willful sin for which you have not even a fig leaf of an excuse takes a lot of grace. But we need to confess all our sin. And because our willful sins are known to us we need to do more than make a general confession of sin; we need to confess our particular sins. But this is so hard for men to do. And this is what makes presumptuous sins so dangerous. Yet it is exactly sins of this degree that the godly are constantly tempted with in an ungodly culture.

Because of man's proclivity to sin God has provided restraints. As we have seen God has specifically set up civil government to be a restrainer. But to those in authority, whether in the church or in the state, who begin to promote sin God issues a special warning.

"Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!" (Isaiah 5:20).

God pronounces a "woe", that is a curse upon them. Why? Because they make it so much easier for men to sin. When those in authority maintain God's law then it is hard to sin. Then men have to willfully rebel against God and man, against divine as well as human government. But when those in authority bless that which God has condemned and they declare as righteous that which God has pronounced to be wicked then sin increases exponentially. The masses plunge in and like sheep without a shepherd wander into sin. And weak Christians stumble in after them, though they know better, because everyone is doing it and they have become desensitized to that sin. That is why the scriptures command,

"Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil" (Exodus 23:2).

That the restraints have come down and the multitude is rushing into sin is no excuse for the Lord's people. We are to know better. For us it is high handed sin. We are called to obey God. We are called to be holy. We are not to be conformed to this world. We are to fear God. We are to pray the prayer of David.

"Who can understand his errors? cleanse thou me from secret faults. Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression" (Psalm 19:12-13).

We must never forget the deceitfulness of sin and the ease of those progressions in sin that form the slide to perdition. The Bible is filled with the examples of those who started off well but fell by the wayside. From Lot's wife, who looked back longingly to Sodom and the pleasures of this life, to Demas of whom Paul says, *"For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world"* (2 Timothy 4:10) we see the casualties in this spiritual warfare. To persevere in the faith of Jesus Christ

we must see the deceitfulness of sin; we must note the progressive degrees of sin; we must be aware of how sin progressively binds us in its coils; and we must pray for grace to walk that straight and narrow path that leads to eternal life. We must pray for persevering grace that God will be our Shepherd and ".....*lead us in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*"