

SCRIPTURE STUDIES

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May God bless you as you study His Word.



Old Testament Study: Exodus 1:15-22

The Heroic Midwives

¹⁵The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, ¹⁶“When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.” ¹⁷The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. ¹⁸Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, “Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?”

¹⁹The midwives answered Pharaoh, “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.”

²⁰So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. ²¹And because the midwives feared God, He gave them families of their own.

²²Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: “Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”

As we learned in the previous issue, some years after they went to live in Egypt, the children of Israel began to face persecution. The Egyptians resented their growing numbers and prosperity, so the Egyptians enslaved them. The result was not what the Egyptians intended: **“But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied”** (Ex. 1:12). So, in this passage, the Pharaoh takes more drastic measures: **“The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, whose names were Shiphrah and Puah, ‘When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live’”** (vss. 15–16).

During any time of persecution and affliction, there are normally heroes, who go beyond what is expected of them, and who show bravery in the face of danger, in order to aid the afflicted. Shiphrah and Puah are two such heroes. There is no consensus among commentators as to whether they were Hebrew women (as the NIV translation **“Hebrew midwives”** suggests), or Egyptian women (a reading which would favor a translation

of “midwives for the Hebrews”). Their names were Egyptian, and it seems to me that their dialogue with Pharaoh suggests that they were Egyptian. I cannot imagine that Pharaoh would expect Hebrew women to kill Hebrew children. Also, I do not think Pharaoh would have shown such lenience to Hebrew women who failed to carry out his commands.

It seems that these two were in some way in charge of all of the midwives for the Israelites, for they were given the command by Pharaoh, and then they were called to account for the carrying out of the command. The command by Pharaoh was horribly evil. “What blood so guiltless as that of a child new-born?” [Henry, on vs. 15ff]. Apparently, the king wanted the midwives to act secretly, clandestinely killing the defenseless children without the knowledge of the mothers. “Pharaoh’s project was secretly to engage the midwives to stifle the men-children as soon as they were born, and then to lay it upon the difficulty of the birth, or some mischance common in that case” [Henry, vss. 15ff].

The midwives would have none of the Pharaoh’s evil plan: **“The midwives, however, feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live. Then the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and asked them, ‘Why have you done this? Why have you let the boys live?’ The midwives answered Pharaoh, ‘Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive’”** (vss. 17–19). It took a great amount of courage to defy a direct order from the Pharaoh. The source of their courage and their admirable behavior in this episode was that they **“feared God.”** The fear of God is a good thing. It keeps us from evil.

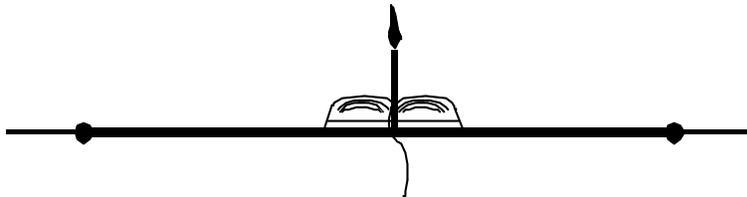
This is an early and instructive example of ordained civil disobedience, of obeying God rather than man. They refused to obey an evil law of man, because to do so would have caused them to break a law of God. In general, of course, we are to obey the laws of the land, and in fact, we are commanded to do so (see Rom. 13; Matt. 22:21). But when the laws of the land conflict with God’s laws, we are to say, with Peter, **“We must obey God rather than man”** (Acts 5:29).

Now, some would fault the midwives a bit for lying to the Pharaoh when they told him that they never arrived in time to kill the babies. Some would say that the midwives should have boldly told Pharaoh that they disobeyed his command. In my opinion, to not lie in that situation would have been exceedingly reckless, and would have bordered on putting God to the test. To tell the Pharaoh that they purposely disobeyed him may have put the lives of other midwives in danger, and would certainly have put their own lives in danger. Someone might say, “Well, they should just tell the truth, and trust that God would save them.” But would not doing such a thing be testing God, by expecting some sort of miraculous delivery from the Pharaoh’s wrath? Is not a much more natural way to get out of danger to tell a lie to the evil Pharaoh?

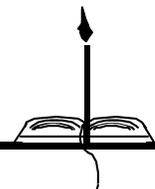
I cannot fault the midwives for their lie. I certainly cannot agree, as some would contend, that there are absolutely no circumstances when it is proper to lie. There are the trivial examples, such as when your wife asks you, “Does this dress make me look fat?” There are also more profound examples. Such as, suppose you are hiding Jews from the Nazis in your attic. If an SS man comes to your door and asks you if you are hiding Jews, should you not lie to him? Or should you turn in the people you are hiding? Of course you should lie. And why? Because to turn in the Jews would be cowardly, and it would be a sin. To turn them in would essentially be aiding in the murder of them. To turn them in would be to gravely disobey the law of love: **“Love your neighbor as yourself.”** This is the crux of the matter. What I would consider to be permissible lying are times when to not lie disobeys the law of love. In such cases, we have conflict between two laws of God. We are not to lie, but at the same time we are to love our neighbor as ourself. When these commandments conflict, the law of love trumps, for it is the second greatest commandment (see Matt. 22:39).

Certainly, there is no evidence that God faulted the midwives for their lies. On the contrary, He blessed them for their courage and obedience: **“So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous. And because the midwives feared God, He gave them families of their own”** (vss. 20–21). “The services done for God’s Israel are often repaid in full” [Henry, on vs. 15ff]. The midwives saved the children of the Israelites, and so God blessed them with **“families of their own.”**

Pharaoh, frustrated that his plan to destroy Hebrew children by using the midwives failed, gave an order to all the Egyptian: **“Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: ‘Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live’”** (vs. 22). Pharaoh’s order to the midwives was secretive. His plan was that the midwives would kill the children without the mothers even knowing that the children were murdered. Here, Pharaoh goes public with his evil plan and enlists all of the Egyptians to help in the slaughter of God’s people. “The tyrant, finding that his snares and deceit availed nothing, now shakes off fear and flies to open violence... Lest there should be any lack of executioners, he gives this charge to all the Egyptians, whom he knew to be more than ready for the work” [Calvin, on vs. 22].



A Classic Study: PATIENCE IN AFFLICTION



A Classic Study by Richard Baxter (1615–1691)

[Here, we continue a reprint of excerpts from Richard Baxter's work entitled *Obedient Patience*. In each article, Mr. Baxter gives advice on how to be patient through a specific type of affliction.]—*Ed.*

Settled Doubts of Sincerity and Salvation; Temptations to Despair, pt. 2

(Continued from last month's issue. Mr. Baxter is enumerating considerations concerning this type of affliction)

8. It is one thing to have grace, and another thing to know that we have it: many have it, who doubt whether it be sincere. And it is an unspeakable mercy to have it, though you doubt of it. God knoweth His grace in us, and will own it, when we doubt of it or deny it. As long as this foundation of God is sure, that God knoweth who are His, and while we name Christ we depart from iniquity, we are safe, though through fear we are uncomfortable.

9. Though true faith do of its own nature tend to the peace and quietness of the believer, yea, and to fill his soul with joy; yet it does not always quiet it; but it always consenteth to the baptismal covenant, which maketh us Christians, and so far trusteth Christ for pardon, grace, and glory, as to cast our souls and hopes upon Him, and to forsake all other trust and hopes rather than to forsake Him. As I have oft said, if a prince say to a beggar, "Go out of thy own country with me in this ship, and trust me to convey thee to Mexico or China, and I will make thee a lord or prince"; if he venture and go with him, though he trembles with fear at every wave or pirate in the voyage, he truly trusteth him, and shall speed accordingly. If a physician say, "Trust me and take my medicine, and I will undertake to cure you;" if the patient take his medicine, he shall be cured, though he tremble with fear, and doubt of the success: he trusteth him practically, if he cast his hope upon him, though with fear. Though faith and obedience be formally two things, faith, which will cause us to consent, venture, and follow or obey Christ, preferring heaven, whatever we lose by it, is saving faith, whatever doubts, fears, or disquietment remain. If this were better

understood, timorous and dark or melancholy Christians (who know there is none but Christ to trust to, and therefore resolve to be ruled by Him) would not so ordinarily think they have no true faith, because it does not cast out all their doubts and fears, and quiet and comfort them; which indeed a strong faith would do, which is not hindered by error or diseases.

10. We greatly wrong God and ourselves in contenting ourselves with poor, diminutive thoughts of the essential love and goodness of God. When we think of the sun (a thousand times bigger than all the earth), and of all the stars, and the incomprehensible orbs of the heavens, and the unconceivable swiftness of their motions, and the power and extent of their rays of light and emanations, we are overwhelmed with the thoughts of the greatness, power, and wisdom of God; but when we think of His goodness and love, we scarce think much more highly of it than of the goodness and love of a father, a friend, or some excellent man. And should we match His power but with a man's, what madness and ugly blasphemy were it!

Yet I would not have the presumption here to mistake, and hence to conclude that a God so good will not condemn the rejecters of His grace, and say, essential, infinite love will make all men as happy as He can. For, 1. Experience assureth us of the contrary; that He maketh great variety of creatures, and permitteth pain and misery in the world. 2. And the execution of justice on the impenitent, wicked subjects is good as a means to the right government of free agents. 3. And the infiniteness of God's goodness and love does not appear in His loving any creature which is finite, but in loving that which is infinite.

But yet we must conceive of His essential attributes as equal in themselves. And if God's goodness and love were conceived of by man, in any proportion to His greatness and power, we could never so easily suspect His kindness, nor fear that He will damn those who unfeignedly desire to please Him; nor should we fly from Him as from a hurtful enemy, but long to be nearer Him in holy communion, as we desire the company of our wisest, dearest friends; nor should we be so distrustful of Him, as if He were no security to us from our dangers; but the name of the Lord would be our strong tower, to which when we fly, we should believe that we are safe, and our trust in God would be the quieting of our tormenting fears and cares.

11. And we have these poor thoughts of the love of God to man, because we do not sufficiently study the miraculous demonstrations of it in our Redeemer: diversions cause us to neglect this study; and perverseness and unbelief do cause us to give it too narrow a room and too slight and short entertainment in our thoughts. Nothing in this world does better deserve our most diligent and delightful study, than the gospel of Christ, and the wonderful work of divine love in man's redemption and salvation: study this till you firmly believe it, and taste it, and it will be as angels'

food, a heavenly feast here sent down to earth, to draw men's hearts to God in heaven. The love of God will turn your very hearts into returning holy love. It was drops of love that Christ sweat in the shape of blood in His agony, and it was a stream of love which flowed from His pierced side, in the shape of blood and water. It is love which the three witnesses on earth, and the three from heaven, attested. God knew how much sin had obscured His love and goodness to man, more than His power and greatness, by making man an unmeet receiver and discernor of it, by reason of guilt, fear, and naughtiness of heart; and therefore how very backward man is to believe and relish God's love. Therefore while Satan more industriously enticeth the soul of man to the idolatry of creature carnal love, than ever He did entice the bodies of men to worship Baal or such like; God hath set up His own image sent down to man from heaven, in opposition to Satan's idols, that sense may have suitable means for the moral conquest of the tempter, and the replenishing of the soul with a truly excellent facilitating love; and in a congress of the love of God and man, in and by Him that is God and man, heaven may be here begun, and may have a fuller communion with souls on earth, than it had before Christ's incarnation. Study the gospel aright, as the book of divine love, and it will turn you from many unprofitable studies, and cure sinful, melancholy fears, better than all other medicines in the world. And even those that said with Thomas, "**Unless I may see and feel, I will not believe**" (John 20:25), or as a holy divine in deep melancholy rashly said to me, "If an angel from heaven should tell me that I have free grace, I would not believe him"—they would repent as both these did. And when by faith you have as it were put your finger into His wounded side, the sense of divine love will make you cry out, "**My Lord, and my God**" (John 20:28).

12. And it greatly hurteth Christians, that they are not duly sensible, how much it is Satan's design and work in all his temptations to misrepresent God to man, and hide His love and goodness from us: as he does it in the wicked by drawing them to fleshly, deluding love, and making them ignorant, unbelieving, or forgetful of the love of God; so he does much against better men by raising many objections against it, and filling them with false imaginations, and diminutive or suspicious thoughts against God, as if He were far more terrible to us than amiable.

13. And it wrongs some that they misunderstand the office of conscience, as if it always spoke as an oracle from God, whereas it is but the act of a dark understanding, which very usually erreth, and misjudgeth of our state; and a mistaking conscience accusing falsely, as graceless, etc. shall no more condemn us at God's bar than a slandering enemy. "**I judge not my own self,**" saith Paul, "**I know nothing by myself, [inconsistent with sincerity], yet am I not thereby justified: There is**

one that judgeth me, even the Lord” (I Cor. 4:4): that is, it will not really go with me as I judge, but as God judgeth.

14. And alas! When fear beareth down both faith and reason, as to the act, no silencing reason prevaieth with the soul. I prove to them from the gospel this great truth; that Christ damneth none (that hear the gospel) but those that willfully reject Him and refuse His offered grace, out of greater love to something else, and this to the last. I oft convinced dejected Christians that this is true, and that this is not their case; they do not continue to refuse Christ and His grace by preferring something else. And yet this quieteth them not, nor receive they the conclusion; for fear, and feeling, and weakness, and melancholy, overpowereth their reason; as bitter physic would not let children believe that it was good for them, and given them in love.

15. Though no pretence of patience must abate our desires after full assurance and perfection, yet while we find by experience that God will have men on earth to differ much from those in heaven, and to have but low and little things in comparison of their joy and glory, it is our great duty to be thankful for our present measure, and to wait in hope for more. He that hath no comfortable apprehension of his condition, can have no thankfulness for it: and we are all obliged to great thankfulness for the least degree of grace and hope: and thankfulness is somewhat more than patience, and therefore does include it.

The acts of the understanding and of the will go together: and if we had as full an understanding of the heavenly state, as those have that possess it, our wills by answerable love and joy would now enjoy it; and so we should have the peculiar privileges of the glorified here on earth. But this is no more suited to our present state in flesh, than it is to an infant in the womb to know what cities, courts, and churches are, or what trades, and merchandise, and husbandry is, or what books, and arts, and sciences are, or what meat, and drink, and recreation are. We must be content on earth with the measure which God designeth unto earth. We see by constant experience, that He hath precluded the heavenly state from all our senses; He will not let us see what is done above. The first martyr had such a sight by miracle, but we must not expect it. He will not let our departed friends appear to us here to give us notice of what they see. He will not send angels to satisfy our desire of such knowledge; nay, infernal devils shall appear but rarely: the rareness of all these leaveth sadness in doubt whether there be any such thing or not. And Paul's sight of paradise was such as must not be uttered to us.

And full subjective certainty of salvation, which excludeth all doubts and fears, is so high a degree as few in flesh, I think, obtain. Objective certainty every true Christian hath; that is, his salvation (if he so die at least) is absolutely certain itself, so that his belief and hope of it shall never

deceive him. But to be certainly known to men, that is, with an apprehension which as much excludeth doubts and fears as sight and possession would do, or as the light and visible objects exclude all doubts whether we behold them, or as we know that two and two are four, or that every effect hath a cause, and every relate a correlate, and that full contradictions are inconsistent; I think this degree of certainty none have on earth, without some miraculous inspiration or revelation. But we may attain to so firm an apprehension of that truth and blessedness, which is certain in itself, as may make our hope, and joy, and desire far greater than our doubts, and fears, and aversion. And this joyful life of well-grounded hope may be called a certainty or full assurance; though yet it be far short of perfect, and the certainty of beatifical vision and fruition. And alas! It is but very few true Christians who attain this quieting, joyful degree.

All this being considered, you see that while we are on earth, we must not expect heaven; nor in the wilderness expect the Land of Promise: Joshua and Caleb's encouraging words, and the bunch of grapes, and God's promise and presence, and His conducting light, provision, and protection, must quiet us in our journey: and some few have Moses' Pisgah-sight. Murmuring at wilderness-wants, dangers, and difficulties, was the Israelite's sin and fall. We must not look for the harvest at seed time, nor for more knowledge, and assurance, and joyful apprehensions of heaven, on earth, than is suitable to the state of travelers in flesh: we are yet, alas, too sinful; and sin will breed doubts and fears: we are here very ignorant, and conscious that we are very liable to err; and that every man hath many errors; and therefore we are apt to doubt even of that which we see and feel, yea, and to fear where we see convincing evidence of certainty; and we can scarce tell when and how to trust our own understandings: we are in a dark world; and in a dark body, and chained to it in our actings; all our grace and goodness is imperfect; and till every grace be perfect in us, assurance of salvation will not be perfect; for the perfection of every grace is necessary to it. And is it any wonder that such a wight as man, in flesh, and sin, and under temptations, and in a dark, malignant world, which God hath very much forsaken, should not have the joy of full assurance of invisible glory? The Christians of all those ages, who held that none (or only a few rare persons) could be certain of their salvation, could not have that certainty which they thought none had. Yet they did, and we must, rejoice in hope, and be thankful here for a traveling degree.



New Testament Study: Matthew 13:47-58

Separation of the Wicked from the Righteous

⁴⁷“Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. ⁴⁸When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. ⁴⁹This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous ⁵⁰and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Jesus tells one more parable about the kingdom of heaven: **“Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away”** (vss. 47–48). Jesus also gives an interpretation of the last part of this parable: **“This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”** (vss. 49–50). This parable keeps with the theme of all of the parables in this chapter, that is, the intermingling of the righteous and wicked in this world. In the last part of the parable, Jesus speaks of the divisional judgment of these men, when the wicked are thrown into the **“fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”** Note that when Jesus speaks of the **“fiery furnace”**, this is the interpretation of the parable. The **“fiery furnace”** is not part of the parable, but part of reality. The punishment of the wicked is real, and horrid. The Lord of the Universe has stated that it is real. **“Those who would have us think lightly of the punishment of the ungodly have no countenance in the teachings of the Lord Jesus”** [Spurgeon, on vss. 49,50].

Jesus tells us that the final separation of the wicked from the righteous will take place **“at the end of the age.”** Until then, of course, the wicked and righteous share this world. The **“righteous”** are not righteous by

their own merits, **“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”** (Rom. 3:23). Rather, they are those who have been clothed with the righteousness of Christ, through faith in His atoning sacrifice on the cross. The **“wicked”** are those who have not accepted the divine forgiveness offered freely to them, and so, they will be judged on their own merits; and on those merits, they will come up short.

Jesus does not give us an interpretation of the first part of the parable, where the gathering of the fish into the net takes place. We will assume that the gathering into the net is the preaching of the Gospel, in an attempt to draw people into the fellowship of believers. Note that the gathering into the net seemed successful, for the net was full. However, the success was not as great as it seemed, for there were many bad fish that were gathered in. In the same way, churches often mistakenly count success in terms of attendance. But the success of a church should be measured by the quality of believers, not the quantity of attendees.

Understanding Jesus' Teachings

⁵¹**“Have you understood all these things?”** Jesus asked.

“Yes,” they replied. ⁵²**He said to them, “Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.”**

After He finished telling His disciples the parables, Jesus asked them: **“Have you understood these things?”** The disciples replied: **“Yes.”** Hmm. If the disciples truly understood all of the parables correctly, I sure wish they had given us an interpretation of all of them! As we have pointed out in our discussion of the parables in this chapter, there are many disputes as to the proper way to interpret them.

A possible motive for Jesus asking this question was to impress upon us the importance of understanding His teachings, beyond merely hearing His teachings. “The mere form of hearing a sermon can profit no man, unless he comprehends what it means... His intellect must be set in motion, and his heart impressed: ideas must be received into his mind; he must carry off the seeds of new thoughts. Without this he hears in vain... There are thousands who go regularly to places of worship, and think they have done their religious duty, but never carry away an idea, or receive an impression... Let us take with us to church, not only our bodies, but our

minds, our reason, our hearts, and our consciences” [Ryle, 155]. And then, once we have understood the teachings of our Lord, we are to go beyond understanding and apply His teaching to our lives.

In addition, we are to share our understanding with others: **“He said to them, ‘Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old’”** (vs. 52). Having understood, we are to be hospitable with our knowledge, and give it freely to others. “Fresh knowledge, Christ is saying, carries fresh responsibility” [Thomas, on vs. 52].

Actually, Jesus, in this case, is speaking to the **“teachers of the law”** who are instructed in the teachings of the Old Testament. Having heard and understood Jesus’ teachings, they were to bring out **“new treasures as well as old.”** They were to still teach the truths of the Old Testament, as well as teach the truths of the Gospel.

Jesus in His Hometown

⁵³When Jesus had finished these parables, He moved on from there. ⁵⁴Coming to His hometown, He began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. “Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?” they asked. ⁵⁵“Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t His mother’s name Mary, and aren’t His brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? ⁵⁶Aren’t all His sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” ⁵⁷And they took offense at Him.

But Jesus said to them, “Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor.”

⁵⁸And He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith.

“When Jesus had finished these parables, He moved on from there” (vs. 53). Jesus was always on the move, making the most of His short time on earth.

“Coming to His hometown, He began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. ‘Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?’ they asked. ‘Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t His mother’s name Mary, and aren’t His brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren’t all His sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?’ And they took offense at Him” (vss. 54–57). Here we have a classic case of familiarity

breeding contempt. Despite the wisdom of His teachings, and despite His astonishing miraculous powers, both of which the people acknowledged, rather than worshipping Him, they took **“offense at Him.”** “This episode shows how easily men are made willing to oppose truth if it happens to go contrary to their own preconceived ideas and inclinations” [Thomas, 210]. They weren’t expecting the Messiah to come from their hometown Nazareth, and so Jesus (in their eyes) could not be worthy of respect.

Jesus responded to His treatment in Nazareth: **“But Jesus said to them, ‘Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor’**” (vs. 57). There seems to be a bit jealousy in the townspeople’s reaction to Jesus. They took offense, thinking, “Well, I’m from Nazareth. Why wasn’t I given such powers, such wisdom?” We should learn from this not to despise God’s work on those who are close to us, not to be jealous of God’s anointing upon our family members or close friends. We should rather rejoice in the work of God in those around us, and support them in their service to our Lord.

The offense they took was only to their detriment: **“And He did not do many miracles there because of their lack of faith”** (vs. 58). “The despising of Christ turns to the disadvantage of the despiser. Despising of the ministers prejudices men of the blessing of the ministry, and misbelief is punished by the Lord’s hiding His power from the misbeliever” [Dickson, on vs. 58]. “Unbelief bound His hands. Why should He spend His sacred energy among a people who would not be profited thereby?” [Spurgeon, 185].

“We cannot plead ignorance, without being at the same time convicted by our own consciences both of sloth and ingratitude. It were, indeed, a strange defence for man to pretend that he has no ears to hear the truth, while dumb creatures have voices loud enough to declare it; to allege that he is unable to see that which creatures without eyes demonstrate; to excuse himself on the ground of weakness of mind, while all creatures without reason are able to teach.”

-- John Calvin



A Topical Study: Self-Examination

A Discourse of Self-Examination, pt. 2 by Stephen Charnock (1628-1680)

Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith: prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates? (II Cor. 13:5, AV).

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? (II Cor. 13:5, NIV).

(At the end of the previous study, Mr. Charnock told us why self-examination is a necessary duty. Here he speaks of the diligence required for self-examination)

2. *'Tis a duty that requires diligence and care.* That which is of infinite consequence in the state of your souls, ought not to be built upon sandy and slight foundations. 'Tis called communing with a man's own heart (see Ps. 4:4). Not a slight glance and away, but a sweeping and looking with a candle (see Luke 15:8), wherewith every cranny and chink is pried into. There are many parts of the body hidden with fat, so there must be careful removing of several things to come at them: a searching for some precious filings of gold in a heap of dust. An employing all the faculties of the soul in a diligent search: **"My spirit made diligent search"** (Ps. 77:6). 'Tis expressed by counting: **"I thought on my ways"** (Ps. 119:59), he looked over the acts of his soul, one by one. The heart is called the **"inward parts"** or depths of the belly (see Prov. 20:7), as the bowels are folded together in many coats and coverings, that they are not easily come to; so the heart of man if full of devices.

(1). *Diligence is requisite, because the work is difficult.* 'Tis no easy matter to be acquainted with ourselves. The soul is not well acquainted with its own features, and preserves not the species of itself. We **"behold our faces in a glass, and soon forget what manner of men we are"** (James

1:23-24). As man is apt to know anything but himself; so it is more easy for him to know anything than himself, as the eye sees everything but itself. There must be diligence to discern the rational workings of our soul, to know whether we truly understand such a thing, or really and firmly will such a good. The judgment of man is corrupted, and misrepresents things like a cracked glass. We can more easily judge of a bodily than of a spiritual disease; because the understanding which should judge of the state of the soul is sickly and ill affected itself. Our wills also being so changeable, sometimes set on one thing, and sometimes flitting to another, the spiritual workings of them are not so readily discernable. This work is done by a reflex act; and reflex acts in spirituals, as well as naturals, are weakest and more languishing, whereas direct acts are more powerful and vigorous. Where grace is small, and corruptions many, it must be hard to discern it, as it is for an eye to discern a small needle, especially if in the dust and rubbish. The roots of sin also lie deep, like Achans wedge of gold in the earth, not easily to be found without good directions. Lust lies in secret corners; there is a deceitfulness of it, subtle evasions, and specious pretences: consideration is requisite to the discerning of them. External acts discover themselves; but the inward acts of the soul, which are the surest evidences, are not discernable without a diligent inspection. The natural inconstancy and levity of our spirits divert us, and the streams of our corruptions cloud and bemist us, and control our endeavors in self-examination, that we cannot sometimes any more fixedly behold the motions of grace, than we can see the beams of the sun in a black and mourning sky.

(2.) *Diligence is requisite, because man is naturally unwilling to this duty.* He would live anywhere but with himself, think of anything but himself; delights most in those things which hinder him from a consideration of his own state. Men are more willing to have their minds rove through all the parts of Nature, than to busy themselves in self-reflection; would read any book or relation, rather than the history of their own heart. We are nearest to ourselves *physically*, and furthest from our own selves *morally*. Men whose titles are cracked and unsure, are loathe to have them tried before the judge, and come under the siftings of conscience. Ever since the fall we run counter to God: 'tis the property of the Divine Nature first to know himself, and then to know other things; but we are cross, would know any other thing, but not ourselves, would read others, and not so much as spell ourselves. We naturally abhor any actions wherein we may be like God, though they are the most proper operations for our souls, and suitable to the nature of them, as reflex acts are. There being in us a contrariety to God and His Law, to God and His Gospel, there results from thence an unwillingness in us to bring our hearts under the examination of conscience, that power which acts by authority and deputa-

tion from God. And when grace eggs us on at any time to the performance of the duty, do not our hearts hang back, and our corruptions check us in it? Satan is no mean instrument in this; he is said to blind the world, that they might not know their state. He hath lost his likeness to God in his primitive happiness, and ever since envies man the recovery of that likeness, which is possible to man, and impossible to himself; and therefore diverts him from a glance towards it, and endeavours after it, the first step to which is self-reflection.

The *unwillingness to do this duty ariseth,*

[1.] *From carnal self-love.* 'Tis natural to man to think well of himself, and suffer his affections to bemist or bridle his judgment. A biased person cannot be a just judge. Every man is his own flatterer, and so conceals himself from himself. Very few that are uncomely in body, or deformed in mind, but think themselves as handsome and honest as others. David so loved himself that he saw nothing of his sin, but was fair in his own eyes, till Nathan roused him up, by telling him, "**Thou art the man**" (II Sam. 12:7). Every man would be "**right in his own eyes**" (Prov. 16:2). Every Blackamore fancies himself to have a comely colour. This self-love keeps men off from this work, for fear they should behold their own guilt, and their souls be stung with anguish. Men that are bankrupts are loathe to cast up their accounts, lest it should appear to them that they are undone. Some are loathe to see their ugly faces in a glass. Conscience awakened by this duty, bites and stings. And men are loathe to impair their own ease; because they would escape the din of an accuser in their own bosoms. They turn fugitives from their own hearts, and would rather go to hell in a feather-bed, than to Heaven in a fiery chariot. While man seeks nothing more than himself in a sinful way, he conceals himself and flies furthest from himself in a reflexive way.

[2.] *From Presumption and Security.* Some walk as securely, as if there were no heaven, and it concerned them not; others walk as presumptuously, as though they were heirs apparent unto it, and yet have no title. Many will have a false persuasion of their faith and interest in Christ at the last day (see Matt. 7:22), and cry, "**Lord, Lord.**" And the foolish virgins will knock as confidently, and expect entrance to the feast as well as the wife. They will not believe but they have a title to heaven, till Christ Himself clap the door upon them, and manifest the contrary. Had they raked in their own souls, and been plain dealers with themselves, they could not but have found themselves in a lost condition. Those that thus presume, cannot endure to hear of the differences between hypocrisy and sincerity; how far a cast-away may go in religion. This was the reason the Pharisees were such enemies to Christ, because he raked in their consciences; they could never come near Him, but he brought some indictment against them of hypocrisy. As Tertullian called heretics, "*Lucifuge*

Scripturarum”, because they would not be cured of their errors; so are such men also afraid to bring their hearts to the test of the Word, because they would not be cured of their false presumptions. As Ahab hated Micah, so these their own consciences, because they expect to hear that from them which they think evil, and cannot have such a view of themselves in that glass, as they desire to have.

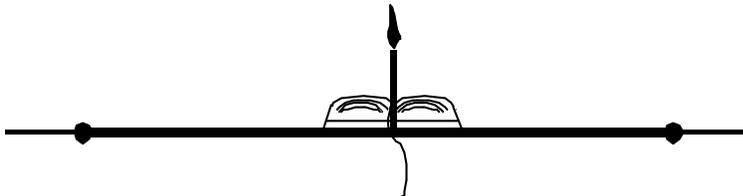
(3.) Diligence is requisite, *because man is hardly induced to continue in this work*. That self-love which makes them unwilling to enter upon it, renders them unfit to make any progress in it. When we do begin it, how quickly do we faint in it? How soon are our first glances upon ourselves turned to a fixedness upon some slight object? Every mans heart is like an unruly horse, that will be going out of the way, if there be not resolution to check it in its first starts, and bring things to a judicial trial. The heart itself is so light and fluttering, that it wants the stability of grace to fix it in the trial of grace.

(4.) Diligence is requisite, *because we are naturally apt to be deceived, and to delude ourselves*. Our natural blindness and dimness render us liable to mistake, and our deceitful heart may sing a *requiem* to us while we are fools. We have a subtle enemy that lies in wait for us, who can transform himself into an angel of light, and disguise his serpentine hissings to make them appear like the breathings of the Spirit. If Adam in innocence, who had an ability to discern his methods, was deluded by him, much more may we be deceived by him in a state of corruption, when our hearts naturally have his stamp, and are inclined to take his part, and join with him in a self-deceit: **“The heart of man is deceitful”** (Jer. 17:9). ’Tis the great impostor and cheat of the world, the anti-Christ within us, the deceiver of our souls, as the great anti-Christ is called the deceiver of the nations. How apt are we to take upon trust what our heart first speaks! James and John could tell Christ that they were able to **“drink of His cup”**, and no question they meant as they spoke (see Matt. 20:22), but had it come to a trial, they would not have endured to sip of it; and the issue manifested it, they turned their backs upon him as well as the other disciples. The Israelites, had they tried themselves by their present resolution, **“All that the Lord our God shall speak unto thee, we will hear and do it”** (Deut.5:27), might have subscribed themselves as pious as any in the world; they spoke no other than they meant. But God had a further inspection into them than they had into themselves: **“Oh that there were such a heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep my commandments always!”** (Deut. 5:29). Natural conscience is often silenced by a pretence and show; and man is naturally apt to make his own corrupt judgment, sometimes also his passion, the standard of good and evil; and not only to frame grace according to his own affections, but a God also: **“Thou thought’st that I was altogether such an one as thyself”** (Ps.

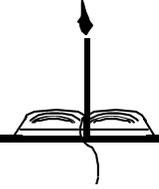
50:21). The apostle intimates it in that signal mark of caution, when he presseth a truth to which natural conscience will subscribe, that **“neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor covetous, nor drunkards, shall inherit the kingdom of God”** (I Cor. 5:9). **“Be not deceived”**, saith he; even in these things, men may deceive themselves with false hopes, much more in moral righteousness. Many boast themselves rich in spirituals, when they are really poor; so did Laodicea think herself rich, when God gave her another inventory of her estate, that she was **“poor and miserable, and blind and naked”** (Rev. 3:17). There is too much resting in the world upon outward privileges, and often beggars conceit themselves princes because they dream of scepters. How many extend their hopes as far as their wishes, and these as far as a fond fancy and imagination!

(5.) Diligence is necessary, because *to be deceived in this is the most stinging consideration*. To drop into hell when a man takes it for granted that he is in heaven, to dream of a crown on the head when the fetters are upon the feet, will double the anguish. 'Tis better for a rich man to dream that he is a beggar, for when he awakes, his fears vanish; than for a beggar to dream that he is rich, for when his dream ends, his sorrow begins. The higher the false conceit, the lower do men sink when they fall; the higher men's expectations of heaven are without ground, the more stinging is their loss of it. To have vain hopes, till God puts us into the scale and weighs us, will be a miserable disappointment. For a man to deceive himself aggravates this, as self-murder is accounted a greater sin than the murder of another, because it is against that charity to ourselves, which is the copy and rule of charity to another. For Jesus told us: **“Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”** (Matt. 19:19).

(6.) Diligence is necessary, because *many have miscarried for want of it*. Thousands that have thought themselves in the suburbs of heaven, have been cast down to the depths of hell. If all should be saved that think they shall be saved, the strait way would be that which leads to hell: for what man is there almost that does not confidently believe he shall be happy? How many dream they are going to paradise, and when they awake, find themselves in the devil's arms?



A Study in Psalms: Psalms 56



Psalm 56 - In God I Trust

For the director of music. To [the tune of] "A Dove on Distant Oaks."
Of David. A *miktam*. When the Philistines had seized him in Gath.

- ¹Be merciful to me, O God,
for men hotly pursue me;
all day long they press their attack.
- ²My slanderers pursue me all day long;
many are attacking me in their pride.
- ³When I am afraid, I will trust in you.
- ⁴In God, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I will not be afraid.
What can mortal man do to me?
- ⁵All day long they twist my words;
they are always plotting to harm me.
- ⁶They conspire, they lurk,
they watch my steps, eager to take my life.
- ⁷On no account let them escape;
in Your anger, O God, bring down the nations.
- ⁸Record my lament; list my tears on Your scroll—
are they not in Your record?
- ⁹Then my enemies will turn back
when I call for help.
By this I will know that God is for me.
- ¹⁰In God, whose word I praise,
in the LORD, whose word I praise—
- ¹¹In God I trust; I will not be afraid.
What can man do to me?
- ¹²I am under vows to You, O God;
I will present my thank offerings to You.
- ¹³For You have delivered me from death
and my feet from stumbling,
that I may walk before God in the light of life.

The occasion of this psalm was when **“the Philistines had seized [David] in Gath.”** This most likely refers to the episode in I Sam. 21:10ff, when David pretended to be insane in order to escape the king of Gath. David found himself in Gath when he was fleeing from Saul, who was himself trying to kill David. So David found himself facing trial after trial. “When once God’s children are entered on their trials, they meet with new and unexpected difficulties, as David here flying from one enemy, falls into the hands of another” [Dickson, 334].

In this psalm, David picks up where the previous psalm left off. Speaking to the Lord, David ended the previous psalm with: **“But as for me, I trust in You”** (Ps. 55:23). As we will see, though facing trial after trial in this psalm, David sounds the refrain: **“In God I trust.”**

David begins his call for help with a cry for mercy: **“Be merciful to me, O God, for men hotly pursue me; all day long they press their attack. My slanderers pursue me all day long; many are attacking me in their pride”** (vss. 1–2). David’s cry for mercy was both a general and specific cry. In general, David sins, as we all sin, and so he was in need of God’s mercy. Specifically in this situation, David himself unwisely fled to the land of his enemies, and so, David himself was in good part to blame for the trouble he was facing, so he asked for mercy.

David prays to the Almighty *God*, for help facing mortal *men*, as he says: **“Be merciful to me, O God, for men hotly pursue me.”** David highlights in his juxtaposition of the words **“God”** and **“men”** the great differences in the powers of the two. When one has God on his side, as David points out a little later, **“What can mortal man do to me?”** (vs. 4). “It is idle to indulge engrossing fears of puny mortals” [Plumer, 591]. Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself taught us not to fear mortal man. He said: **“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul”** (Matt. 10:28). “We never act more unwisely than when we succumb to apprehensions arising from man’s wisdom or power. Until our foes can cope with the Almighty, can ‘confront omnipotence’, or ‘check the stream of the divine benignity’, or ‘oppose the artillery of the skies’, a righteous man, having a righteous cause, has no ground of alarm” [Plumer, 591]. “As we must not trust to an arm of flesh, when it is engaged for us, so we must not be afraid of an arm of flesh, when it is stretched out against us” [Henry, cited in Plumer, 591].

The realization of God’s Almighty power is a great catalyst for faith. David is confident God will come through for him: **“When I am afraid, I will trust in You. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid”** (vss. 3–4). This, as we have mentioned, is the refrain of the psalm, and in fact, the theme of the psalm: Trust in God to save us from evil, mortal men. For David, fear leads him to God: **“When I am afraid, I will trust in You.”** David’s confidence in God is based on his knowledge of God’s past deliverances, as documented in the Word of

God. So David says, **“In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust.”** In praising God’s word, there is probably a reference also to the prophecy given to David by Samuel that David would accede to the throne (see I Sam. 16). The Philistines could not kill David without nullifying God’s prophecy, and so, David knew that he would escape, for God’s word is true. David’s trust in God ends up dissolving his fear: **“In God I trust; I will not be afraid.”**

David’s enemies worked hard at their evil: **“All day long they twist my words; they are always plotting to harm me. They conspire, they lurk, they watch my steps, eager to take my life”** (vss. 5–6). For their hard-working evil, David wants God to bring them to account: **“On no account let them escape; in Your anger, O God, bring down the nations”** (vs. 7).

David expresses the pain he feels, hoping God’s empathy will cause Him to act on David’s behalf: **“Record my lament; list my tears on Your scroll—are they not in Your record?”** David looks for a sign that his prayer is being answered: **“Then my enemies will turn back when I call for help. By this I will know that God is for me”** (vs. 9).

David then returns to his refrain of trust in God, with praise, in the midst of his fear: **“In God, whose word I praise, in the LORD, whose word I praise—In God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”** (vss. 10–11). “As often as we are tempted, we must again and again profess and confirm our hope and confidence in Jehovah” [Plumer, on vs. 11].

This time, David uses two names of God when praising Him: **“God”** (or “Elohim” in Hebrew); and **“the LORD”** (or “Jehovah” in Hebrew). “The first word, *Elohim*, is a name belonging to God as a judge; the second word, *Jehovah*, is a name of mercy. I will praise God whether He deal with me in a way of justice or in a way of mercy, when He hath thunder in His voice, as well as when He hath honey under His tongue” [Charnock, cited in Spurgeon on vs. 10].

David finally sees his deliverance from trouble: **“I am under vows to You, O God; I will present my thank offerings to You. For You have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God in the light of life”** (vss. 12–13). Whether David is seeing here his deliverance by faith before it happens, or whether these words were written in retrospect after his deliverance, we cannot tell here. Whatever the case, David plans to fulfill the obligation of vows he made to God when he was in trouble. In our desperation, we are inclined to make vows to God, saying, “Oh Lord, if you get me out of this, I’ll do such and such...” We must be careful when we make such vows, for we are under a definite obligation to fulfill them. And indeed, we should cheerfully fulfill them, as we enjoy life without our affliction, **“walking before God in the light of life.”**

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Constancy

“Like as [a compass] doth ever
[look to] the north star, whether it
be closed and shut up in a coffer
of gold, silver, or wood, never
losing its nature; so a faithful
Christian man, whether he
abound in wealth or be pinched
with poverty, whether he be of
high or low degree in this world,
ought continually to have his faith
and hope surely built and
grounded upon Christ, and to
have his heart and mind fast fixed
and settled in Him, and to follow
Him through thick and thin,
through fire and water, through
wars and peace, through hunger
and cold, through friends and
foes, through a thousand perils
and dangers, through the surges
and waves of envy, malice, hatred,
evil speeches, railing sentences,
contempt of the world, flesh, and
devil, and even in death itself, be
it never so bitter, cruel, and tyrant-

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