

Gospel Grounds & Evidences

Part V

By [John Owen](#)

Wherein it does consist,--how faith works it in the soul.

(1.) What it does respect; and it has a twofold object:--

[1.] Such past sins as, by reason of their own nature or their aggravations, have left the greatest impression on the conscience. It respects, indeed, in general, all past and known sins that can be called to remembrance; but usually, in the course of men's lives, there have been some sins whose wounds, on various accounts, have been most deep and sensible: these are the especial objects of this godly sorrow. So was it with David; in the whole course of his life, after his great fall, he still bewailed his miscarriage therein; the like respect he had unto the other sins of his youth. And none have been so preserved but they may fix on some such provocation as may be a just cause of this sorrow all their days.

[2.] It respects the daily incursions of infirmities, in failings, negligence in our frames or actions,--such as the best are subject to. These are a matter of continual sorrow and mourning to a gracious soul that is engaged in this duty and way of repentance.

(2.) Wherein it does consist; and the things following do concur therein:--

[1.] Self judging. This is the ground and spring of all godly sorrow, and thereon of repentance, turning away the displeasure of God, 1 Cor.11:31. This the soul does continually with reference unto the sins mentioned; it passes sentence on itself every day. This cannot be done without grief and sorrow; for although the soul finds it a necessary duty, and is thereon well pleased with it, yet all such self-reflections are like afflictions, not joyous, but grievous.

[2.] The immediate effect hereof is constant humiliation. He that so judges himself knows what frame of mind and spirit becomes him thereon. This takes away the ground from all pride, elation of mind, self-pleasing: where this self judging is constant they can have no place. This is that frame of mind which God approves so highly, and has made such promises unto; the humble are everywhere proposed as the especial object of his own care; his respect is to them that are of a broken heart, and of a contrite spirit: and this will grow on no other root. No man, by his utmost diligence, on any argument or consideration,

shall be able to bring himself into that humble frame wherein God is delighted, unless he lay the foundation of it in continual self-judging on the account of former and present sins. Men may put on a fashion, frame, and garb of humility; but really humble they are not. Where this is wanting, pride is in the throne, in the heart, though humility be in the countenance and deportment. And herein does this godly sorrow much consist.

[3.] There is in it a real trouble and disquietment of mind: for sorrow is an afflictive passion; it is contrary to that composure which the mind would constantly be at. Howbeit, this trouble is not such as is opposed unto spiritual peace and refreshment; for it is an effect of faith, and faith will produce nothing that is really inconsistent with peace with God, or that shall impeach it: but it is opposite unto other comforts. It is a trouble that all earthly things cannot take off and remove. This trouble of his mind, in his sorrow for sin, David on all occasions expresses unto God; and sometimes it rises to a great and dreadful height, as it is expressed, Ps.88 throughout. Hereby the soul is sometimes overwhelmed; yet so as to relieve itself by pouring out its complaint before the Lord, Ps.102:1.

[4.] This inward frame of trouble, mourning, and contriteness, will express itself on all just occasions by the outward signs of sighs, tears, and mournful complaints, Ps.31:10. So David continually mentions his tears on the like account; and Peter, on the review of his sin, wept bitterly; and Mary washed the feet of Christ with her tears;--as we should all do. A soul filled with sorrow will run over and express its inward frame by these outward signs. I speak not of those self-whole, jolly professors which these days abound with; but such as faith engages in this duty will on all occasions abound in these things. I fear there is amongst us too great a pretence that men's natural tempers and constitutions are uncompliant with these things. Where God makes the heart soft, and godly sorrow does not only sometimes visit it, but dwell in it, it will not be wholly wanting in these expressions of it; and what it comes short of one way it may make up in another. Whatever the case be as to tears, it is certain that to multiply sighs and groans for sin is contrary to no man's constitution, but only to sin ingrafted in his constitution.

[5.] This godly sorrow will constantly incite the mind unto all duties, acts, and fruits of repentance whatever; it is never barren nor heartless, but being both a grace and a duty, it will stir up the soul unto the exercise of all graces, and the performance of all duties that are of the same kind. This the apostle declares fully, 2 Cor.7:11.

This, therefore, is another thing which belongs unto that state of repentance which faith will bring the soul unto, and whereby it will evidence itself on the occasions before mentioned; and indeed, if this sorrow be constant and operative, there is no clearer evidence in us of saving faith. They are blessed who thus mourn. I had almost said, it is worth all other evidences, as that without which they are none at all; where this frame is not in some good measure, the

soul can have no pregnant evidence of its good estate.

4. Another thing that belongs to this state, is outward observances becoming it; such as abstinence, unto the due mortification of the flesh,--not in such things or ways as are hurtful unto nature, and really obstructive of greater duties. There have been great mistakes in this matter; most men have fallen into extremes about it, as is usual with the most in like cases. They did retain in the Papacy, from the beginning of the apostasy of the church from the rule of the Scripture, an opinion of the necessity of mortification unto a penitent state; but they mistook the nature of it, and placed it for the most part in that which the apostle calls the "doctrine of devils," when he foretold believers of that hypocritical apostasy, 1 Tim.4:1-3. Forbidding to marry, engaging one sort of men by vows against the use of that ordinance of God for all men, and enjoining abstinence from meats in various laws and rules, under pretence of great austerity, was the substance of their mortification. Hereunto they added habits, fasting disciplines, rough garments, and the like pretended self-macerations innumerable. But the vanity of this hypocrisy has been long since detected. But therewithal most men are fallen into the other extreme. Men do generally judge that they are at their full liberty in and for the use of the things esteemed refreshments of nature; yea, they judge themselves not to be obliged unto any retrenchment in garments, diet, with the free use of all things in themselves lawful, when they are under the greatest necessity of godly sorrow and express repentance. But there is here a no less pernicious mistake than in the former excess; and it is that which our Lord Jesus Christ gives us in charge to watch against, Luke 21:34-36.

This, therefore, I say, is required unto the state we inquire after: Those things which restrain the satisfaction of the appetite, with an aversation of the joyous enticements of the world, walking heavily and mournfully, expressing an humble and afflicted frame of spirit, are necessary in such a season. The mourners in Zion are not to be ashamed of their lot and state, but to profess it in all suitable outward demonstration of it;--not in fantastical habits and gestures, like sundry orders of the monks; not in affected forms of speech, and uncouth deportments, like some among ourselves; but in such ways as naturally express the inward frame of mind inquired after.

5. There is required hereunto a firm watch over solitudes and retirements of the night and day, with a continual readiness to conflict temptations in their first appearance, that the soul be not surprised by them. The great design, in the exercise of this grace, is to keep and preserve the soul constantly in an humble and contrite frame; if that be lost at any time, the whole design is for that season disappointed. Wherefore, faith engages the mind to watch against two things:--

(1.) The times wherein we may lose this frame; (2.) The means whereby. And,--

(1.) For the times. There are none to be so diligently watched over as our solitudes and retirements by night or by day. What we are in them, that we are

indeed, and no more. They are either the best or the worst of our times, wherein the principle that is predominant in us will show and act itself. Hence some are said "to devise evil on their beds, and when the morning is light they practice it," Mic.2:1. Their solitude in the night serves them to think on, contrive, and delight in, all that iniquity which they intend by day to practice, according to their power. And on the other side, the work of a gracious soul in such seasons is to be seeking after Christ, Cant.3:1,--to be meditating of God, as the psalmist often expresses it. This, therefore, the humble soul is diligently watchful in, that at such seasons vain imaginations, which are apt to obtrude themselves on the mind, do not carry it away, and cause it to lose its frame, though but for a season; yea, these are the times which it principally lays hold on for its improvement: then does it call over all those considerations of sin and grace, which are meet to affect it and abase it.

(2.) For the means of the loss of an humble frame. They are temptations; these labour to possess the mind either by sudden surprisals or continued solicitations. A soul engaged by faith in this duty is aware always of their deceit and violence; it knows that if they enter into it, and do entangle it, though but for a season, they will quite cast out or deface that humble, contrite, broken frame, which it is its duty to preserve. And there is none who has the least grain of spiritual wisdom, but may understand of what sort these temptations are which he is obnoxious unto. Here, then, faith sets the soul on its watch and guard continually, and makes it ready to combat every temptation on its first appearance, for then it is weakest and most easily to be subdued; it will suffer them to get neither time, nor ground, nor strength: so it preserves an humble frame,--delivers it frequently from the jaws of this devourer.

6. Although the soul finds satisfaction in this condition, though it be never sinfully weary of it, nor impatient under it, yea, though it labour to grow and thrive in the spirit and power of it, yet it is constantly accompanied with deep sighs and greenings for its deliverance. And these greenings respect both what it would be delivered from and what it would attain unto; between which there is an interposition of some sighs and groans of nature, for a continuance in its present state.

(1.) That which this groaning respects deliverance from is the remaining power of sin; this is that which gives the soul its distress and disquietment. Occasionally, indeed, its humility, mourning, and self-abasement are increased by it; but this is through the efficacy of the grace of Christ Jesus,--in its own nature it tends to hurt and ruin. This the apostle emphatically expresses in his own person, as bearing the place and state of other believers, Rom.7:24.

And this constant groaning for deliverance from the power of sin excites the soul to pursue it unto its destruction. No effect of faith, such as this is, is heartless or fruitless; it will be operative towards what it aims at,--and that in this case is the not-being of sin: this the soul groans after, and therefore contends for. This is the

work of faith, and "faith without works is dead:" wherefore it will continually pursue sin unto all its retirements and reserves. As it can have no rest from it, so it will give neither rest nor peace unto it; yea, a constant design after the not-being of sin, is a blessed evidence of a saving faith.

(2.) That which it looks after is the full enjoyment of glory, Rom.8:23. This, indeed, is the grace and duty of all believers, of all who have received the first-fruits of the Spirit; they all in their measure groan that their very bodies may be delivered from being the subject and seat of sin,--that they may be redeemed out of that bondage. It is a bondage to the very body of a believer, to be instrumental unto sin. This we long for its perfect deliverance from, which shall complete the grace of adoption in the whole person. But it is most eminent in those who excel in a state of humiliation and repentance. They, if any, groan earnestly,--this they sigh, breathe, and pant after continually; and their views of the glory that shall be revealed give them refreshment in their deepest sorrows; they wait for the Lord herein more than they that wait for the morning. Do not blame a truly penitent soul if he longs to be dissolved; the greatness and excellency of the change which he shall have thereby is his present life and relief.

(3.) But there is a weight on this desire, by the interposition of nature for the continuation of its present being, which is inseparable from it. But faith makes a reconciliation of these repugnant inclinations, keeping the soul from weariness and impatience. And this it does by reducing the mind unto its proper rock: it lets it know that it ought not absolutely to be under the conduct of either of these desires. First, it keeps them from excess, by teaching the soul to regulate them both by the word of God: this it makes the rule of such desires and inclinations; which whilst they are regulated by, we shall not offend in them. And it mixes a grace with them both that makes them useful,-- namely, constant submission to the will of God. "This grace would have, and this nature would have; but," says the soul, "the will and sovereign pleasure of God is my rule: 'Not my will, holy Father, but thy will be done.'" We have the example of Christ himself in this matter.

7. The last thing I shall mention, as that which completes the state described, is abounding in contemplations of things heavenly, invisible, and sternal. None have more holy and humble thoughts than truly penitent souls, none more high and heavenly contemplations. You would take them to be all sighs, all mourning, all dejection of spirit; but none are more above,--none more near the high and lofty One. As he dwells with them, Isa.57:15, so they dwell with him in a peculiar manner, by these heavenly contemplations. Those who have lowest thoughts of themselves, and are most filled with self-abasement, have the clearest views of divine glory. The bottom of a pit or well gives the best prospect of the heavenly luminaries; and the soul in its deepest humiliations has for the most part the clearest views of things within the veil.

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