

## The Inward Conflict between the Flesh and the Spirit

Preached at North Street Chapel, Stamford, on Lord's Day Morning, Sept. 2, 1860

"This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would. But if ye be led of the Spirit, ye are not under the law." Gal. 5:16, 17, 18

There are many vital and essential points of difference between him that fears God and him that fears him not—between the believer and the unbeliever. But there is one more marked than any other, chiefly for this reason, that it comes more closely home to the heart, and accords more clearly with the experience of every child of God. This distinguishing mark is, *the conflict between the flesh and the spirit*, spoken of in our text. Those who are dead in sin cannot feel any such conflict, for in them there is no opposing principle to the flesh. The glorified spirits in heaven can have no such conflict, because in them the flesh has ceased to be. It is only then upon earth—only in the bosom of a saint, in this present arena of time in which is fought the good fight of faith, that there can be a conflict of the nature described by the apostle: the flesh lusting against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh, and these two so contrary the one to the other, that he cannot do the things which he would.

But let us seek, as far as we can, to be clear upon this point, for if the inward conflict be a certain mark of grace, we should be very careful not to mistake anything else for it. And this distinction is all the more necessary, since there is a

conflict in the bosom of many who are not under the influence of divine grace. For instance, there may be a conflict in a man's breast who knows nothing of the life and power of God in his soul, between a principle of integrity and a principle of dishonesty. A man in business, say a merchant, a banker, a tradesman, or a person holding a confidential situation, may have an opportunity of realising a large sum of money by deviating from the path of rectitude, and he may have an inward conflict whether he shall abide by upright, honourable principles, or depart from them to secure the anticipated advantage. This might be a very severe conflict, but it would not be one between "the flesh and the spirit," between nature and grace. Or a person might have an inward contest between acting liberally or niggardly upon some occasion when his compassion or benevolence might be appealed to, and he might find a hard struggle within between a willingness to give and a spirit of covetousness to withhold. But this is not a conflict of nature and grace: it is merely a conflict of a better kind of nature against a worse kind of nature—of a higher species of flesh against a lower species of flesh. Or a man may have a conflict between bad temper and good temper; between giving vent to angry feelings and keeping them down; between carrying out his own inclinations in various ways, or subduing them on a principle of duty and conscience. All these struggles which natural men feel every day involve an internal conflict, but still not the same kind of conflict which exists in the bosom of one who fears God; for all these opposing principles are at best but flesh fighting against flesh. Their spring and end are merely natural and sensual, and when the conflict ceases, whether it terminates in the victory or the defeat of the better principle, it leaves the man just where it found him, under the power of sin and Satan, without God and without hope in the world. The very heathen, as we know from their writings, experienced the same conflict, and it is to be found

discussed at large in books of morality, which are utterly destitute of spiritual life and light. But how different is the conflict spoken of in our text, and which is known experimentally by all who are made alive unto God! Theirs is a spiritual conflict; a contest for life or death; an unceasing battle between nature and grace; between the flesh and the Spirit. Nor is the issue of this conflict, though prolonged, dubious or uncertain, for its end is certain victory, and not merely victory achieved for time, but a glorious victory obtained for eternity; for it is "the good fight of faith;" and we know that the end of that faith is the salvation of the soul, and the prize of that contest is the crown of eternal life.

If you look at the words which form our text, you will find that the apostle is speaking to the Galatians of "walking in the Spirit," and tells them that if they were enabled so to walk, they "would not fulfil the lust of the flesh." This leads him to speak of the way in which the flesh does lust, and also of the way in which the spirit acts against it as an opposing principle; the consequence of which is, that neither in one sense nor in another can a child of God do the things that he would. But he would comfort them by this reflection, that if they were led of the Spirit, and were walking in the Spirit, they were not under the curse of a condemning law but under grace, and therefore that the conflict, however sharp or long, would in their case end in certain victory.

In opening up these words, therefore, this morning, I shall, as God may enable,

I.—*First*, endeavour to describe how the *flesh lusts against the Spirit*, and the *Spirit against the flesh*; and how those are *contrary the one to the other*.

II.—*Secondly*, how from this results that *we cannot do the*

*things that we would.*

III.—*Thirdly*, how, though we cannot do the things that we would, yet *by walking in the Spirit we shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh.*

IV.—*Fourthly*, if we are walking in the Spirit, and are led by the Spirit, then we are not *under the law* in its condemnation and curse, but under the Gospel in its salvation and blessing.

I.—But let me, before I enter into this conflict, define my terms; let me clear my ground. I like to leave nothing obscure and uncertain in the word of truth, or in my exposition of it, if I can, with God's help, cast any light upon it. By the "flesh," then, here we are to understand that corrupt nature, that sinful principle which we derive from our fallen parent Adam. However high or low, broad or narrow, however sensual or refined this principle may be; in whatever various ways it may work, it is still one and the same: it never rises beyond its level; it is and ever will be, amid all its varying shapes and lines, as the Scripture designates it, flesh. It is called "flesh" for various reasons. First, as derived by natural generation from Adam, who was our parent after the flesh. Secondly, from its being so naturally dead Godward, there being no heavenly strength or life in it, but like a lump of dead flesh, incapable of gracious actings, or of being transmuted into anything holy and spiritual. Thirdly, because its very tendency and end is corruption; for as flesh naturally dies, petrifies, and rots, so the end of the flesh, viewed in a spiritual light, is death and corruption: as we read that before the flood, "all flesh had corrupted its way upon the earth;" and as the apostle speaks, "He that soweth to his flesh shall of his flesh reap corruption." (Gal. 6:8.)

I must now explain what the apostle means by the word

"spirit." I understand, then, by the term "spirit" here not the Holy Spirit, but that which is produced by the Holy Spirit. As the Lord himself explains it, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." And again, "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God." (Rom. 8:16.) So also, "I pray God your whole spirit, and soul, and body be preserved blameless." (1 Thess. 5:23.) In all these passages we find the word "spirit" signifying not the Holy Ghost, but that which is produced by the Holy Ghost; in a word, that new and divine nature which is produced by the new birth, the new man of grace, which is called "spirit" as being wholly spiritual, for the Spirit can produce nothing but what is spirit; for as the flesh produces flesh, so the Spirit produces spirit. And as he produces by his power upon the heart a new, spiritual, and holy principle, it is called "spirit," because it is the very life and power of God in the heart, bears the image of Christ stamped upon it, and in it dwell all the fruits and graces, teaching and testimony, work and witness of the Holy Ghost himself.

I must explain also the meaning of the word "lust" here. At the time of our present most excellent translation, the word had not that gross and sensual meaning usually attached to it now. It meant merely desire, whether of a higher or lower nature; whether it was grovelling in the sensual meaning of the term, or aspiring after higher things. In fact it was used much in the same way as the cognate and almost similar word, "list." "The wind bloweth where it listeth;" that is, where it willeth, or desireth. This must be sufficiently evident even to common sense, for the Spirit is said to lust, and we could not attach any gross idea to the lusting of the Spirit, for his desire must, like himself, be ever holy and pure. I take the word, therefore, in what I may call a neutral signification, as meaning simply desire, breathing, aspiration,

and the bent of the mind strongly and eagerly towards any object; otherwise we shall confound the whole passage, for if we attach any sensual and gross meaning to the term, what shall we do with it when we come to describe the Spirit lusting after the flesh? We must give it a pure meaning there; so we will view the word as merely signifying a strong, ardent desire, therefore differing from "lusting" not so much in signification as in intensity.

I. Having thus cleared our ground, we now come more immediately into the field of battle; and the first warning note of the gospel trumpet which I shall sound in your ears and in my own, is, to call us to look and examine whether we can find anything in our hearts' experience corresponding to the vivid description here drawn by the pen of the Holy Ghost; for this will if not fully decide the matter on whose side we are, yet give us some good grounds for drawing a conclusion as to our state and standing before God; for if indeed we are partakers of a new and heavenly birth, we cannot be strangers to this spiritual conflict, and shall be so far manifested as fighting on the Lord's side against sin, Satan, and self. We know that we possess one of the two conflicting principles, "flesh," because all have that by their descent from our fallen ancestor; but we can only assuredly know that we have "spirit," by the internal testimony of the Spirit of God bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of the Most High. But in the absence of this clear and indubitable testimony, we may have an encouraging evidence of being partakers of the grace of God, by feeling a spiritual conflict perpetually going on in the breast; for how can there be a conflict in your bosom between "flesh" and "spirit" if you have no spirit there? How can there be a struggle in your heart between two opposing principles if one of those opposing principles be altogether absent? So that if you can find a conflict in your bosom between two contrary principles,

and one of these is clearly on the side of grace against nature, of faith against unbelief, of God against self, of repentance against sin, of hope against despair, of submission against rebellion, and of godliness against ungodliness, you have so far an evidence that you are a partaker not only of the flesh, which you painfully know, but that you are a partaker also of the Spirit, which you pleurably feel. But these two principles are described as being "*contrary the one to the other.*" It does not say they are different; for things may be different, yet not contrary. Blue differs from black, and purple from scarlet; but they are not contrary, as black and white. But flesh and spirit are so contrary that they are opposed to each other upon every point. As white is opposed to black, as heaven is opposed to hell, as Christ is opposed to Belial, as truth is opposed to falsehood, as grace is opposed to sin, so "the spirit" and "the flesh" are contrary to each other—by an opposition so close, and position so embracing every particular, that you cannot name a single part in which you will not find this contrariety thoroughly existing. But we shall see this better, perhaps, if we look at the various instances in which they are contrary the one to the other.

1. "The flesh" is *hard, impenitent, obdurate, unrepenting*; there is nothing in it soft, tender, and yielding to divine impressions; nothing in it that is melted into love or obedience. Whatever softness it may display on other points, even to tears, its very nature is to be obstinate and obdurate against God and godliness. But "the spirit," at least as divinely wrought upon, is tender, yielding, penitent, contrite, broken, submissive, bowed down before the throne of God so as to take the impression of his will and word. But these two feelings are utterly contrary. You never can reconcile penitence and impenitence, obduracy and contrition, hardness of heart and softness of heart, a seared conscience

and a tender conscience. These things are as irreconcilable as light and darkness, as truth and error; but the flesh is naturally one and the spirit graciously the other; therefore, they are contrary the one to the other.

2. Again, the flesh is *unbelieving*. It is impossible that the flesh can believe—I mean, of course, in a spiritual and saving manner; for there is a natural faith that the flesh may, and indeed frequently does possess. In this sense, many believed in Jesus Christ in the days of his flesh, who were not made partakers of saving faith, for to the very persons of whom we read that "many believed in him," we afterwards find the Lord declaring, "Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do." (John 8:30, 44.) So Simon Magus believed (Acts 8:13), and the apostle tells us that it is possible to have "all faith so as to remove mountains, and yet be nothing." (1 Cor. 13:2.) This natural faith the flesh may possess; but as to what the scriptures call the "spirit of faith," believing in the Son of God so as to receive the end of our faith, even the salvation of the soul; believing in the blood, and love, and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, so that the conscience is purged from filth, guilt, and dead works to serve the living God; as to any faith that works by love, purifies the heart, overcomes the world, subdues sin, casts out Satan, and gains the victory, so as for ever to reign with Christ,—such a spiritual, divine, experimental, and saving faith as this never did dwell in the flesh. Faith, that is, saving faith, is expressly called in the Scripture, "a fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. 5:22); and is declared to be "the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8); for indeed it is among those good gifts and perfect gifts, every one of which "is from above and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variableness neither shadow of turning." (James 1:17.) Indeed how is it possible that a living and spiritual faith can be a fruit of, or dwell in the flesh, which is but a mass of



unbelief, atheism, infidelity, and as such, is utterly unable to rise above unbelieving ground into the higher regions of a living faith? In this point then, the flesh and the spirit are contrary the one to the other; for what is so contrary as faith to unbelief? Jacob was not more contrary to Esau, David to Saul, or John to Judas.

3. Nor, again, can the flesh *love*. Its nature is not to love, but to hate; that is God's own description of it. "The carnal mind" (by which is meant the disposition, inclination, and whole breathing of the flesh,) "is enmity against God." And observe the word "enmity." It does not say "an enemy," but "enmity," that is enmity itself. An enemy may be reconciled, but enmity never. Thus the whole flesh from head to foot, beginning, middle and end, root and branch, in life and death, is enmity, unmitigated, irreconcilable enmity against the pure Majesty of heaven. How then can spiritual love dwell in it? I expressly say spiritual love: for the flesh has natural love, as there are, as all must admit, natural affections. These may rise to a considerable height, and are what we may almost term, the fairest relics of the fall. There is, for instance, the mutual love of the sexes, which, as issuing in marriage, is the foundation of our nearest and dearest social ties. There is parental love; there is conjugal love; there is brotherly and sisterly love; there is the love of friends to each other, who are not connected by any bond of relationship. How, indeed, could the world hang together but for these social ties? Society itself would fall into ruin, and an utter blank would succeed to all those tender relationships which sweeten life to thousands, and softens many a harsh track in this ragged world, but for natural love. What would society be if all were monks and nuns? Worldly people are not destitute of natural affection, for that is the last stage of a reprobate mind (Rom. 1:31); nay, on the contrary, a large amount of natural affection and kindness and good feeling is

often displayed by persons who are enemies to the free, distinguishing, and sovereign grace of the gospel. God forbid that we should think they are destitute of kind and affectionate feelings towards each other because they are not partakers of the grace of God. To say so would be to speak in direct contravention of what we daily witness in acts of the greatest benevolence displayed by our fellow creatures in thousands of instances. Whence come our hospitals; the contributions to the amount of hundreds of thousands of pounds to suffering objects in all directions? Or whence come so many affectionate husbands and wives, fathers and children; so many tears dropped over the grave of the departed; so many sacrifices of time, labour, money, and even life itself to alleviate the wants of others, if there be no natural affection in the human heart? But when we come to spiritual love there the scene alters; there the flesh still manifests its innate character of being enmity against God. When, then, we test love by this divine touchstone, we find those who display the greatest natural affection to man often are fearfully wanting in affection to God. These, then, are opposed to each other; for the one is earthly and the other heavenly, the one natural and the other spiritual. When leaving earthly love we come to love to God, to his dear Son, to the word, to the people of God, to heavenly things, then we find the flesh so fearfully lacking. Then its true character becomes manifest. But in this very point the spirit specially shines, for here, as shed abroad by the Holy Ghost, the love of God dwells; here Jesus is felt to be near, dear, and precious; here are heavenly affections and pure desires; here is union and communion with the Lord and his people.

4. So with *prayer*. The flesh is an utter stranger to spiritual prayer. It can make long prayers, as the Pharisees did, can go through a formal round of duties and self-imposed observances, and satisfy natural conscience by drawing near

unto God with the lips when the heart is far from him. But the Spirit of grace and of supplications, prevalency with God in prayer, so that its sighs and cries enter into the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth, and draw down answers into the bosom, wrestling with Jehovah as Jacob wrestled with the angel, and gaining access into the very presence of him who sits upon the throne of grace, so as to be made and manifested an acceptable worshipper of God in spirit and in truth,—such prayer as this never dwelt in the flesh. This is a height that the hand of the flesh never reached; which the eye of the flesh never gazed upon; which the ear of the flesh never heard of; nor the heart of the flesh ever conceived; for true, spiritual, and prevalent prayer is among the things "which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man," but are among the things "which God hath prepared for those who love him."

5. Nor is there, again, any *spirituality* in the flesh. Men may have a formal, natural, superstitious, and self-righteous religion; may make great sacrifices for their church or creed, and even yield up ease and name, property and life itself for it. How plainly may we see this in innumerable instances both in modern and ancient times. What built up our churches and cathedrals but this natural religion? What carries hundreds and thousands every Lord's clay to churches and chapels? What sets up family prayer in thousands of houses? And what raises thousands of pounds on every side but this spirit of natural religion? In ancient days particularly, how we see this religion in lively action! How ancient warriors, men guilty of every crime, abandoned the world, shut themselves up in monasteries, macerated their body, lashed their back with scourges, fed on coarse food, dressed in sackcloth, and died in what was termed the very odour of piety and holiness; and yet, viewed by the spiritual eye, must we not say that they began in the flesh and ended in the

flesh? Where in all this was Jesus and his blood? Where the work of grace upon the heart? Where a total renunciation of all hope or help in self, and living a life of faith in the Son of God? All this natural religion, to whatever height it may be carried, whatever form it may wear, or however fair to the eye it may seem, is quite distinct from the work of faith with power, from the teaching and testimony of the blessed Spirit in the heart, and from that vital, spiritual, and saving religion which is the very life and breath of God himself in the soul of his saints. Where, in all this natural and fleshly religion, is there the new birth, without which none can enter the kingdom of heaven? Where is there any manifestation of Christ to the soul, or any shedding abroad of the love of God in the heart? The flesh may rise to a great height, but it never can rise up into anything spiritual, heavenly, saving, and divine. Like water, it can never rise above its own level. It is of the earth, earthy, like the first Adam, from whom it comes by natural descent. It may do for time, but will not do for eternity. It may gain the favour of man, but can never win the approbation of God; it may be crowned with human applause, but will never wear the crown of glory.

ii. But now we will see, with God's help and blessing, what the spirit is as opposed to the flesh, for the word of truth declares that these are "*contrary the one to the other.*" So in taking a view of one, we at the same time take a view of the other.

1. Thus, whereas the flesh is hard, obdurate, and impenitent, the spirit is *tender, contrite, repenting, broken*; God producing this godly sorrow for sin in the spirit by the operations of his grace; for the blessed Spirit acts upon the spirit. He is expressly said "to bear witness" to it (Rom. 8:16), which he could not do unless he acted immediately upon it. We must ever bear in mind that the operations and

influences of the Holy Spirit are upon the new man of grace. He does not act upon the flesh, making it thereby holy and spiritual, or indeed any better than it was before. He does not transmute flesh into spirit, or sanctify nature into grace; but he acts upon the new man of grace, and brings forth, by his breathings upon it, every holy fruit and heavenly grace, to the honour, praise, and glory of God. For though born of the Spirit and itself pure and holy, and the very life of God himself in the soul, yet the new man of grace cannot act by itself. We may almost compare it to a locomotive, which cannot move except under the influence of steam; or the sails of a ship, which cannot act except under the power of the wind. So the new man of grace needs the power and influence of the blessed Spirit breathing upon it to move it forward into heavenly actings. Under, then, his divine influences and sanctifying operations, the spirit in a man's breast repents of the sins of the flesh, falls down before the footstool of grace, confesses and acknowledges them, and begs for some sensible manifestation of mercy, as feeling how suitable mercy is to a poor sinner's case.

2. The spirit also is *believing*. If you watch the movements of divine life in your own breast, you will find that there are two opposing principles there. There is that which doubts and disbelieves, and there is that which credits and believes; there is that which is always suggesting arguments, objections, difficulties, ever casting confusion over the plainest principles, and questioning the reality of every truth, however clearly revealed in the Scriptures, or traced by the hand of God in the soul. This I find and feel every day that I live. I find my carnal heart the very seat of unbelief; and that this spirit of unbelief is no dead principle, lying motionless, like a stone at the bottom of a clear brook; but is a living principle of action and movement, objecting, questioning, surmising, and raising up all manner of suspicions against

every one of those vital truths which my heart most dearly loves. Would that it would give me a little rest; but that is not in its nature, for it is ever restless, unceasingly at work, and continually seeking to confuse and darken the mind, and utterly to ruin the soul, by casting it down into the fathomless depths of infidelity. But the spirit, in opposition to this wretched spirit of unbelief, is *believing*. If the Lord has blessed you with a spirit of faith, you will find from time to time there is that in you which does believe, and yet may be sadly opposed by a contrary principle of unbelief. We see the conflict between the two principles in the man who fell down before the Lord with the words, "Lord, I believe." There was the spirit of faith in his heart, but he felt, as we feel, another principle in him, which could not, and would not believe; and he also felt that nothing but the power of the Lord could subdue that obstinate, unbelieving, principle. Therefore he cried, "Help thou my unbelief." Here we see the two principles plainly at work, which we ourselves so often feel. But everything that we have received in faith we have received in the new man of grace, not in our unbelieving nature. "Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?" asks the apostle. (Gal. 3:2.) When we hear in faith, then we receive the Spirit in his witnessing testimony to the reality and to the divine origin and nature of our faith, for "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God," as made "spirit and life" to our soul. (Rom. 10:17; John 6:63.)

3. This Spirit is also *loving*. God is love; and the love of God is shed abroad in the hearts of his saints by the Holy Ghost. The blessed Spirit is a Spirit of love, not only in himself as a Person in the glorious Godhead, but as a spirit of love in a believer's heart. We, therefore, read of "the love of the Spirit." (Rom. 15:30.) If ever we feel—and I hope at times we do—heavenly affections mounting upwards, and a sweet

flow of love to the Lord of life and glory; if ever we love him with a pure heart fervently, and love not only him, but his word, his truth, his people, his cause, his grace, his glory, all that testifies of him, comes from him, and leads to him; if ever his name be to us "as the ointment poured forth," it is by the Holy Spirit influencing the new man of grace in which this love resides, drawing it forth into holy exercise, fixing it upon heavenly things, and especially upon the glorious Person of the Son of God at the right hand of the Father. So it is with love to God's people: we have no love to them in our carnal mind. The flesh hates God, and in hating God, hates those who bear the image of God. But the spirit in loving him that beget, loves those who are begotten of him; in loving the Lord, loves those who are beloved by the Lord; in loving Jesus, loves those in whom it can trace the mind and image of Jesus. And though this love may sink at times very low in the soul, yet as drawn forth by the operations of the blessed Spirit, it springs up and rises again; and under these gracious renewals there is once more a sweet flowing forth of love toward those who love the Lord. I know there is a spirit of love, not only to the Lord himself, but to his dear people, from my own experience, for I do feel at times sweetly springing up in my heart love to those in whom I see the likeness of the Lord Jesus, and I love them for his sake.

4. But this new spirit is also opposed to the flesh as being a *prayerful* spirit. There is no true prayer in the flesh. There is in it formal prayer—mock prayer, I may call it, but no spiritual prayer, because the Spirit of God does not move upon the flesh as a Spirit of prayer, nor does he act upon it by any divine influence so as to draw prayer out of it. But he does move upon the new man of grace, upon the spirit of his own begetting, and that as a spirit of prayer; for he is in us a Spirit of grace and of supplications, and intercedes for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. We are therefore

said "to pray in the Holy Ghost," and "with the Spirit." (Jude 20; 1 Cor. 14:15.) Thus the Spirit of God in a believer's heart is a prayerful spirit, all true prayer springing from his powerful operations and divine influences. Now you may take up this point as a matter of self examination, and see from it how far you have an evidence of being a partaker of grace, from being able to find from time to time springing up in your bosom a spirit of prayer. If you have a spirit of prayer, you have the spirit spoken of in our text, and if you have the spirit it must be born of God; and if you are born of God you are a child of God. Thus you may sometimes, by looking at this evidence, trace up your heavenly genealogy, and find an internal evidence of your being a partaker of grace, and as such an heir of God, and a joint heir with Christ. (Rom. 8:17.) The Spirit itself is said to bear witness with our spirit that we are the children of God (Rom. 8:14); and this inward witness is not merely his direct testimony in the sweet assurance of faith, but his indirect testimony in helping our infirmities, and making intercession for us according to the will of God. (Rom. 8:26, 27.)

5. This spirit is also a spirit of *hope*. There is no real well-founded hope of eternal life in the carnal mind. The unregenerate, therefore, are declared to be without hope and without God in the world. (Eph. 2:12.) It is true that there is a false hope, such as thousands have in the indefinite mercy of God. This is what the scripture calls the hypocrite's hope. And what does the word of truth say of it? What is its nature and what is its end? Its nature the blessed Spirit compares to a spider's web, and its end is to perish and to be cut off. (Job 8:13, 14.) We see in scripture fearful instances of this. We see when God poured out his wrath upon those who had sinned against him with a high hand and had no faith or repentance given unto them, that their hope perished as in a moment. Saul's hope; where was it when he fell upon the



sword? The hope of Ahithophel; where was that when he took a halter and hung himself? Judas's hope; where was that when he fell and his bowels burst forth? Yet Saul prophesied; Ahithophel went to the house of God in company with David; and Judas preached and wrought miracles. Could they have done these things without having some hope? But when the hypocrisy of their heart became manifest, then their hope sank and died. Thus it proved like a spider's web; not a good hope through grace as an anchor sure and stedfast, but the hope of the hypocrite which perishes and comes to nought. But the spirit in you who are born of God is a spirit of hope. With all your doubts, and fears, and difficulties, you are still hoping in the Lord, as David encouraged his soul when cast down within him, "My soul, hope thou in God." When you look at things without, and more especially at things within, you are sometimes almost cast down into despair. Your trials are so many, your sins so great, your heart so vile, your fears so strong, that it seems as if you must give all up; that there is still a spirit of hope in your bosom, and as this has been already the anchor of your soul in many a storm, so you again cast it forth that it may enter within the veil. You cannot give up that, whatever else you may give up. And you do well in holding it fast, for "we are saved by hope" (Rom. 8:24); so that if you have a good hope through grace, and the spirit in your heart is a spirit of hope, you have salvation already in your soul.

6. But the spirit also in the believer's bosom is a spirit of *praise*. The flesh cannot praise God. It can murmur, fret, rebel, be peevish, and be filled with self-pity, but can never bless and praise God for manifested mercy. It is always unthankful. Even the very bounties of providence are for the most part received by it without gratitude. But the spirit in a man's bosom, as wrought upon and influenced by the Holy Spirit, thanks and praises God not only for what it receives in

providence, but much more for every blessing in grace; and when drawn forth into love towards his gracious and divine Majesty, a foretaste of heaven, a beginning of eternal bliss.

iii. But we read, to pass on further with our subject, that "the flesh *lusteth against the spirit*, and the spirit *against the flesh*." I have already explained the meaning of the word "lusteth," that it signifies earnest and intense desire. But besides this natural and innate lusting against the spirit, the flesh has three powerful friends who sustain it in all its lustings, and act upon it so as to maintain them in strength and vigour. First, there is *Sin*, which is its very element, its very constituent principle, and its own darling, firm, bosom friend. Sin is continually prompting, suggesting, and stirring up the flesh to its movements against the spirit. The flesh would, so to speak, lie at times dead if sin were not in its animating breath. But sin being the living, moving, acting principle in it, is ever stirring up its lustings. Do you not find this by personal experience? You feel at times that the flesh in you seems dead, without any particular movement towards evil, though still a lifeless lump as to any movement Godward. But at other times there is a strong and active moving in the flesh towards evil, a lusting after things that God abhors, and which I need not further name. Here is sin working in it, acting upon it, influencing it, and moving it toward the positive commission of evil.

Nor is sin its only friend, foul friend though it be. *Satan* is another; for how Satan can, when permitted, work upon our carnal mind! What rebellion against God he can stir up! What enmity excite! What vile thoughts, dreadful suggestions, and base imaginations he can infuse, even to such heights as I dare not hint at, much less express. How the flesh resembles the sea! How calm at times is the natural ocean—how it mirrors the very heavens in its face! I have seen it with scarcely a ripple upon its surface. And I have seen it in a

storm. But how different under these two aspects. It seems scarcely the same ocean in a calm, and when the yeasty billows rage as though they would sweep away every thing before them. So is the flesh; at times as calm as a millpond, and at others lashed into angry waves by Satan, who, as the Prince of the power of the air, acts upon the heart of man as the wind acts upon the ocean, exciting it to madness and rebellion.

Then there is the *World*, a fast friend of the flesh, which does not act upon it as Satan does, to stir it up into waves of rebellion, but to seduce and draw it aside, encouraging every movement of it against God and toward evil. So what with the corrupt nature of the flesh in itself, and what with these firm friends, though deadly foes to God and godliness—Sin, Satan, and the World—how can we wonder that this flesh of ours is ever lusting against the spirit, and desiring every thing contrary to God and godliness in a believer's bosom; and if it cannot obtain its desires, yet exerts its whole power and influence to have its lusts gratified. Thus the flesh is continually lusting against the spirit. If the spirit, for instance, wants to repent, the flesh lusts against any and every feeling of contrition, brokenness, or sorrow on account of sin, by hardening and steeling the heart against it, or by suggesting self-justifying excuses. If the spirit wants to believe, the flesh lusts against faith by raising up unbelief, and stirring up doubts and questionings, with a whole host of infidel objections against the truth. If the spirit wants to love the Lord or his people, the flesh immediately opposes it by stirring up enmity and dislike. If the spirit wants to pray, the flesh lusts against it by distracting the soul with wandering thoughts and in manner of vile imaginations, so as to confuse the mind, and as if to drown out prayer with a flood of abominations. If the spirit would be meek, submissive, filled with holy thoughts and gracious affections, looking up to the

Lord and seeking after fellowship with him, desiring his presence and manifested love; if it ever be seeking conformity to Christ's image, to know his will and do it, or to be spiritual and heavenly-minded, the flesh lusts with bitter hostility against these gracious actings of the spirit, and shows its vile, earthly nature by interfering continually with every spiritual movement, damping the rising flame, pouring water upon it, and if it cannot quench it, endeavouring to mingle itself with it, so as to pollute it with its own stench and smoke. It is indeed impossible to describe the craft and subtlety by which the flesh manifests its deadly opposition to every thing spiritually good. The more spiritual the employments are, the more is this enmity and opposition manifested and for this reason, because the flesh instinctively knows that the great object of the Spirit is to crucify and mortify it. The flesh does not therefore dislike a natural, formal religion, which does not interfere with its lusts, but allows it its own will and way; but a religion which interferes with its lustings and actings, which curbs it, represses it, and will not suffer it to rule and reign, but crucifies it daily, the flesh cannot brook. It is like a man with a very bad temper: please him, he is all smiles; fret him, he is all frowns. Do the thing that he wants, he is the most agreeable man in the world; oppose him in the least degree, his very eyes flash fire. So with our flesh: gratify it, fondle it, please it, its face is clothed with smiles; not a wrinkle or a ruffle is seen on its countenance; though really dragging the soul to hell, it strews the path with flowers, and flatters its victim with heaven at the very moment that it hurls him over the precipice. But oppose it, mortify it, crucify it, contradict, subdue, and subjugate it, put a bit in its mouth, a saddle on its back, and plunge your spurs into its side, you will then find what the flesh is—as violent as the greatest termagant, as furious as a loosened madman, and as contradictory as a passionate drunkard.

iv. But I must not dwell entirely upon this point. There is the contrary side of the picture; for it would be sad indeed if there were in us nothing but this dreadful flesh, with these vile and furious lustings. Through infinite mercy, through rich, superabounding grace, the spirit lusteth against the flesh, as well as the flesh against the spirit. I have shewn you who are the friends and backers of the flesh in this battle; but, through mercy, the spirit has its friends too, as well as the flesh, or it would come off very badly in this unceasing conflict; and very powerful friends too, for "greater is he that is for us than those that are against us." We may say that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost—a triune God—is the friend of the spirit. But more especially fixing our eyes upon the Son of God as incarnate, we may view him as the especial friend of the spirit, for he is the sinner's friend, and being the sinner's friend, he will never let the poor child of God come off worst in this conflict. Left to itself, the spirit could not resist: it needs a divine influence upon it to teach its hands to war, and its fingers to fight. Abandoned to its own strength, the spirit must give way to the unceasing attacks of the enemy, for it is armed with all the powers of earth and hell. But the Lord comes to the rescue; the Son of God fights our battles; "for he girds his sword upon his thigh" (Psalm 45:3), and he rides forth "conquering and to conquer." (Rev. 6:2.) But *how* does he come to the soul's help? With the promises which he applies with power to support and uphold the fainting spirit; with the sweet manifestations of his Person, work, and love, which arm it with a power not its own; with the gracious influences of his presence, which put new life into it. Secretly and yet powerfully he strengthens, he supports, he encourages, he enables the spirit to carry on the warfare even unto death. The Holy Spirit, too, is especially tender of his own work upon the soul. He originally formed it; it is his own spiritual

offspring; and as a mother watches over her babe, so the blessed Spirit watches over the spirit of his own creating. It is the counterpart of himself, for it is the spirit that he has raised up in the soul by his own almighty power. He, therefore, acts upon it, breathes into it fresh life and power, and communicates grace out of the inexhaustible fulness of the Son of God, thus enabling the spirit to breathe and act, struggle and fight against the flesh, so that the latter cannot have all its own way, but must submit and yield. For the spirit can fight as well as the flesh; can act as well as the flesh; and can desire good as well as the flesh can desire evil. What a mercy for us it is that there are those heavenly breathings in our soul of the spirit against the flesh, cryings out to God against it; and that the Spirit within us thus takes hold of the arm of Omnipotence without us, seeks help from the Lord God Almighty, and by strength thus communicated fights against the flesh, and gains at times a most blessed victory over it. For what can the flesh do against the spirit when animated by divine power? What are sin, Satan, and the world when they have to oppose a Triune God in arms? This makes the victory sure, that our friends are stronger than our foes, and the work of God upon our soul greater than anything sin, Satan, or the world can bring against it. This made the apostle say, after he had been describing the inward conflict, "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Rom. 7:25.) And when he had enumerated the opposition that the Christian had to endure on every side, he cries out, as if in holy triumph, "Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us." (Rom. 8:37.)

II.—But to pass on to our next point, the *consequence* of these two opposing principles is, that "*ye cannot do the things that ye would.*" These words are true in two senses. 1. First, you cannot do the *evil* things that ye would. The flesh is always lusting towards evil, but grace is a counteracting

principle to repress and subdue it. It cannot, indeed, wholly overcome its lustings, but it can prevent those lustings being carried out into open action; for the spirit lusteth against the flesh, and will not let it altogether reign and rule, nor have unchecked its own will and way. What a mercy lies couched here! for what would be the consequence if the flesh had its full swing? What evil is there which you would not do; what crime which you would not commit; what slip which you would not make; what open and horrid fall which you would not be guilty of, except you were upheld by Almighty power, and the flesh curbed and checked from running its headlong course? So you cannot do the things that you would in the worst of all senses. You cannot utterly forsake or forget God, as the flesh would incline you to do; you cannot deny or cease to call on the name of Christ, as the flesh would suggest; cannot live in sin, as the flesh would desire; nor can you give up all religion, nor abandon your hope, nor cast your faith to the winds, as the flesh would urge. The spirit in you, as influenced from above, prevents your doing the things that you naturally would by taking the side of God against the flesh, for it is armed with his authority, and is, as it were, his vicegerent in the soul. When, therefore, the flesh would burst forth into word or action, this vicegerent acts for God, and, like a magistrate or civil officer, speaks in his name, and in his authority thrusts back the malefactor. We can hardly tell at times how we are kept from evil; but it is almost always in obedience to the voice of this inward monitor. We can never praise God sufficiently for his restraining grace; for what should we be without it? What an unspeakable mercy, then, it is that you cannot be what you would be, nor act as you would act, nor speak what you would speak, nor do the things you would do, because there is in you who fear God a spiritual principle which holds you up, and keeps you back from the ways of sin and death in which the flesh would walk. How this spirit of grace and godly

fear kept Joseph in the hour of temptation! How it preserved David when he had Saul in his power as he lay asleep in the cave! How it kept Nehemiah in the fear of God from extortion and oppression! (Neh. 5:15.) And how in thousands of instances it has preserved the feet of the saints, and kept them from doing things that would have ruined their reputation, blighted their character, brought reproach upon the cause of God, and the greatest grief and distress into their own conscience!

So also, in a higher and somewhat different sense, "ye cannot do the things that ye would." You would be pure, holy, free from any working of sin; would believe without any doubt, love without any coldness, hope without any despondency, and serve God night and day without any disturbing hindrance. When you pray, you would have no distracting thought; when you read, you would do so with light, life, and power; and when you hear, it would be with a blessing resting upon your soul. You would never be troubled with any vile imagination, infidel thought, or base suggestion; you would ever love the Lord and his people; have your affections ever fixed on heavenly things; be ever blessed with manifestations of Christ's love; and ever walk in peace with God and his people. But you cannot do the things that you would. And why? Because you are still in the flesh, and the flesh opposes everything which is spiritually good. Thus, in a good sense you cannot do the things that you would; and in a bad sense you cannot. Hence the conflict, a conflict that will never cease whilst we carry about with us a body of sin and death.

III.—But as time is running on, I must now come to our third point, which is, *how we shall not fulfil the lusts of the flesh*; which is, by *walking in the Spirit*. Now observe that there is a difference between the flesh lusting against the spirit, and



fulfilling its lusts. It is one thing to have the lusts of the flesh working in you; it is another thing to fulfil them, to be their slave and subject. But you may ask, "Can we be ever brought to that blessed spot where we shall not fulfil the lusts of the flesh?" Surely; nay more, we must be brought to it, if we are the saints of God. But you will say, How? Here it is then opened up by the finger of God before your eyes: "*Walk in the Spirit.*" It is not, then, by making the flesh any better, by forming resolutions and vows not to listen to its wiles, or be entangled in them, and so overcoming by our own strength the unruly movements of our carnal mind, that we can be preserved from fulfilling its lusts. The evil is of such a kind that if it is suppressed in one point it will break out in another. It is like some diseases in a man's body: keep the disease from breaking out, it will work within; keep it from working within, it will break without. So it is with the flesh: it will work in some shape or other, either within or without; either by fraud or force. Thus we cannot subdue the flesh by the flesh, any more than we can subdue disease by disease. You may take a tiger and shut him up in a den: but he is a tiger still; pare his claws; still he has the tiger nature, and when his claws grow, and the den set wide open, he will use them as before. So it is with this flesh of ours: it is a chained tiger, but a tiger still. You cannot alter the tiger nature, though you pare its claws and though you draw its teeth. But how are you to be kept from walking in the lusts of the flesh, how are you to be enabled to live to the praise and glory of God, and to do those things which are pleasing in his sight? The answer is still the same: By walking in the Spirit. But what is it to walk in the Spirit? To have the Spirit of God given to us in large measure, so as to live under his influence, and to walk in the feeling possession of his power and his grace; to be baptised into the very spirit of the gospel; for the Holy Spirit to make our body his temple; and to live, and speak, and think and act as blessed with the

enjoyment of his divine teachings, operations, and communications. If we walk in the flesh, we shall fulfil the lusts of the flesh; but if we walk in the Spirit, have our affections fixed upon heavenly things, are spiritually minded, have fellowship with the Son of God, enjoy his presence, live to his praise, and have him formed in our hearts the hope of glory; if we thus walk in the Spirit, then we shall not fulfil the lusts of the flesh, for the flesh will be subdued by the Spirit, and its lusts subjugated by his divine influence and efficacious power.

IV.—Now comes our last point, which is the blessed and most encouraging *conclusion*, drawn from the Spirit's work upon the heart: that *if we are thus led by the Spirit* by walking in him; if he be our Guide and Teacher; if he be continually operating upon our heart, and bringing near the influence of his grace; if he be in its and with us, guiding us into all truth, making and keeping us believing, loving, prayerful, tender, watchful, humble, contrite, and sincere: if we are thus led by the Spirit, *we are not then under the law*. Now whilst the conflict is going on in your bosom, you are often in your feelings under the law. The law's curse is ringing in your ears, the law's condemnation piercing your conscience. The flesh in some unguarded moment, it may be, prevails: you are entangled in some evil; you slip and fall into something which brings guilt upon your conscience. Now the law thunders; inward condemnation re-echoes its peals; and the soul falls into bondage, doubt, and fear. But if you are led by the Spirit; if that blessed Guide is pleased to lead you out of your self into Christ's blood and righteousness; if you are experimentally favoured with his blessed teachings and sweet influences, bringing with them light, life, liberty, and love, the law has no more curse for you; it cannot condemn you to hell, nor send your soul to lie for ever under the curse of God. For being led by the Spirit you are delivered from the

curse of the law into the blessing of the gospel; from the bondage of the law into the liberty of truth; from law charges into gospel mercies; from the accusations of a guilty conscience, into the witness of a good, because a purged and sprinkled conscience; and to sum it all up in one sentence, are thus translated from the power of darkness into the kingdom of God's dear Son. O the blessedness of walking in the Spirit, and being led by the Spirit!

If, on the contrary, you are continually under the dominion of the flesh, yield to every vain or sensual movement, give way to every carnal inclination, then you bring yourself into doubt and darkness, bondage and fear. The law condemns and holds its fiery scourge over your shoulders. But if the Lord is pleased to bring your soul into the sweet liberty of the gospel, and baptise you into the love of Christ, then you are not under the law to condemn and curse you, but under the gospel to save and bless you. And this will not only save but sanctify you, for as you walk under the influence of the blessed Spirit, you will not fulfil the lusts of the flesh; you will have power to subdue them, and walk before God in the light of his countenance. I do not say that we are always or indeed often here; but I am sure there is no real peace or happiness except as we know some measure of these things in vital experience.

Thus, in the words of the text, we have not only the conflict described, but the victory also. We are not left by it wounded and maimed in the field of conflict, doubting whether we shall come off conquerors; not left in uncertainty whether it will be a drawn battle, or whether sin, Satan, and the world shall overcome the grace of God. But we have the blessed testimony of God himself, that if led by the Spirit, we are not under the law, but under the saving blessings of the gospel. O blessed spot, to walk in the liberty wherewith Christ hath

made us free! Not to be entangled in the yoke of bondage; but to know the truth and feel its sweet influence and power in our heart, bringing us out of the condemnation of a fiery law, and setting our souls down in blessed liberty at the feet of Jesus, in the sweet enjoyment of the blessed gospel of the grace of God, and thus divinely furnished to every good word and work.