Chapter Twenty-One

Christian and Hopeful Discuss Conviction and Backsliding

Then Christian spoke to his friend:

Chr. “Well, it’s time to go, good Hopeful. It is clear that you and I are to walk by ourselves again.”

So I saw in my dream that they traveled at a rapid pace ahead of Ignorance while he hobbled behind. Then Christian said to his companion, “I feel sorry for this poor man. In the end he will have a very difficult time.”

Hope. “There are many in our town who are in his condition - whole families and even whole streets (including pilgrims’ streets). And if there are so many in our part of the country, how many do you think there are in the town where Ignorance was born?”

Chr. “The Word says, ‘He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn – and I would heal them.’¹ But now that we are alone, what do you think of such men? Do you think they never experience conviction for their sins and consequently do not have fears that their personal situation is dangerous?”

Hope. “You answer that question yourself, for you are older than I.”

Chr. “Then I say sometimes they may. But since they are naturally ignorant, they do not understand that those convictions are there for their good. Therefore, they desperately try to repress them and arrogantly continue to flatter themselves.”

Hope. “I believe, like you, that fear tends to have a good purpose in a person’s life, especially in the beginning when it prepares them to go on their pilgrimage.”

Chr. “Without a doubt it does, if it is the right kind of fear. For the Word says, ‘The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.’”²

¹ John 12:40.

² “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline” (Prov. 1:7).

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Prov. 9:10).
Hope. “How would you describe the right kind of fear?”

Chr. “True, or right, fear is known by three things:

1. By the way it rises up within a person. This fear arises when a person is brought under conviction of his sin which leads to salvation.

2. It drives the soul to lay hold of Christ for salvation.

3. It creates and establishes in the soul a great reverence for God, his Word, and his ways. Right fear keeps the soul tender and makes it afraid to turn away from him - neither to the right nor to the left - to anything that may dishonor God, disturb the soul’s peace, grieve the Spirit, or give an unbeliever a reason to speak with reproach.”

Hope. “Well said. I believe you have spoken the truth. Have we almost passed the Enchanted Ground?”

Chr. “Why? Are you getting tired of our conversation?”

Hope. “No. I just wanted to know where we are.”

Chr. “We only have about two more miles to go. Now let’s continue our conversation. Those who are ignorant do not know that these convictions which produce fear come on them for their good. Therefore, they seek to repress them.”

Hope. “How do they repress them?”

Chr. “First, they think those fears are produced by the devil (though, in fact, they are brought about by God). Therefore, they resist them because they believe these fears are given in order to destroy them. Secondly, they think these fears will ruin their faith (although they do not even realize that they have no faith). So they harden their hearts to these fears. Thirdly, they assume that they should not have any fear. Therefore, they overstep their bounds with confidence in themselves. Fourthly, they see that these fears tend to take away their miserable old self-righteousness. Therefore, they resist them with all of their might.”

Hope. “I know something about this myself. Before I really knew myself, the same was true of me.”

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise” (Ps. 111:10).

“And he said to man, ‘The fear of the Lord – that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding’” (Job 28:28).
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Chr. “Well, let’s end our conversation about Ignorance and talk about another important subject.”

Hope. “I’m all for it. But I would still ask you to begin.”

Chr. “Very well. About ten years ago there was a man named Temporary who lived in your part of the country. He was one of the outstanding religious leaders. Did you know him?”

Hope. “Know him? Yes. He lived in Graceless, a town about two miles from Honesty. He lived next door to a man named Turn-back.”

Chr. “Right. He lived under the same roof with him. At one time, I believe that man was very much awake spiritually and had some awareness of his sins and their consequences.”

Hope. “I am of the same opinion. Since my house was not more than three miles from his, he would often come to me in tears. I really had compassion on him and had not lost hope for him. But one can see that salvation does not come to everyone who cries, ‘Lord, Lord!’”

Chr. “He told me once that he was resolved to go on a pilgrimage as we are doing now. All of a sudden, he became acquainted with a man named Save-self. After that, I didn’t see much of him anymore.”

Hope. “Since we are talking about him, let’s discuss the reason for his sudden backsliding and for others who are like him.”

Chr. “My comments would be helpful, but I would like for you to begin this conversation.”

Hope. “Well then, there are, in my judgment, four reasons that people backslide:

1. Though the consciences of these men are awakened, their minds have not been changed. Therefore, when the power of guilt begins to fade, those things that prodded them to be religious stopped. They naturally turn back to their old ways. This is just like the dog who is sick from what he has eaten and vomits. He doesn’t do it because he chooses to, but because he is nauseated. Then, when he is over his sickness and is no longer nauseated, he turns around and licks up his own vomit. And so what is written is true, ‘A dog returns to its vomit.’ So this passion for heaven comes by virtue of the fact that they fear the torments of hell. When their thoughts of hell and the fear of damnation chills and cools, their desires for heaven and salvation cool also. So when their guilt and fears have gone, their desires for heaven and happiness die, and they return to their old ways.

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3 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 7:21).

4 “Of them the proverbs are true: ‘A dog returns to its vomit,’ and, ‘A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud’” (II Pet. 2:22).
Another reason is that they have oppressive fears that overpower them. I am speaking about the fears they have of other people: ‘Fear of man will prove to be a snare.’ So they seem to be passionate about heaven as long as they are thinking about hell. But when that terror has passed from them, they began to think other thoughts; namely, that it is good to be wise and not run the risk of losing everything. At a minimum they would not want to bring upon themselves unavoidable and unnecessary troubles. And so they become worldly again.

The shame that is associated with religion also becomes a barrier to them. They are proud and arrogant and, in their eyes, religion has little value and is contemptible. Therefore, when they no longer think about hell and the wrath to come, they return once again to their former way of life.

It is burdensome for them to experience guilt and to meditate on the reality of hell. They do not like to experience misery until it actually comes upon them. Even though a glimpse of their guilt and the awfulness of hell could make them run to safety like the righteous, yet they will continue to avoid all thoughts of guilt and terror. Therefore, when they have gotten rid of their awareness of the wrath of God, they gladly harden their hearts and choose the ways that will harden them more and more.”

“You are getting right at the heart of the matter. The bottom line is this: they are unwilling to change their minds and their wills. They are like the felon who stands before the judge. He trembles and seems to repent with all of his heart. But the real issue is that he fears the death penalty and does not detest the actual crime he committed. This is evident because when this man is released, he will continue to be a criminal. If his mind were changed, he would be a different man.”

“Now that I have shown you the reasons some people backslide, why don’t you explain how they do it.”

“I will gladly do that.

1. They try to forget all they can about God, death, and the judgment to come.

2. Then they gradually begin to neglect their private duties such as secret prayer, controlling their lusts, being watchful, being sorrowful over their sin, and other things similar to these.

3. Next they avoid the company of enthusiastic and warm Christians.

4. After that, they grow cold to sacred ordinances such as hearing and reading the Word, regular worship, the sacraments, prayer, and things like these.
5. Then they begin to criticize those who are godly. They find a weakness in a Christian and criticize it maliciously so that they may hold on to what seems to be a valid reason to throw religion away.

6. Soon they begin to associate with, and spend more time with, worldly, loose, and perverse people.

7. Then they give in to worldly and perverse conversations in secret. They are happy if they have seen other honest people do the same thing, so that they can justify their behavior.

8. After this, they begin to play with little sins openly.

9. And, finally, being hardened, they show themselves for who they really are. So, being thrust again into misery, unless a miracle of grace prevents it, they perish forever because they have deceived themselves.”

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