

Hope and Comfort Usually Follow Genuine Humiliation and Repentance

A Sermon by Jonathan Edwards

Hosea ii. 15. And I will give her her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope: and she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt. In the context, the church of Israel is first threatened with the awful desolation which God was about to bring upon her for her dealing so falsely and treacherously with God; because though, in the bold language of the prophet, she had been married to God, she had yet gone after other lovers, and had committed adultery with them, "For she said, I will go after my lovers, that give me my bread, and my water, my wool and my flax, mine oil and my drink." Therefore God threatened that he would strip her naked, and set her as in the day that she was born, and make her as a wilderness, and set her like a dry land, and slay her with thirst, and that he would discover her lewdness in the sight of her lovers, and destroy her vines and fig-trees, and make them a forest. So the prophet goes on terribly threatening her to the end of the thirteenth verse. And those things were fulfilled in the captivity of Israel in the land of Assyria. But in the verse preceding the text, and in the remainder of the chapter, there follows a gracious promise of mercy, which God would show her in the days of the gospel. "Therefore, behold I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her. And I will give her her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope: and she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt." "I will allure her," that is, I will court or woo her again, as a young man woos a virgin, whom he desires to make his wife. God, for her committing adultery with other lovers, had threatened that he would give her a bill of divorce, as verse second. "Plead with your mother, plead; for she is not my wife, neither am I her husband." But here in the latter part of the chapter, God promises that in gospel times he would make her his wife again, as in the sixteenth verse. "And it shall be at that day that thou shalt call me Ishi;" that is, "my husband." And so in verses 19, 20. "And I will betroth thee unto me for ever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me for ever in righteousness, and in judgment, in loving-kindness, and in mercies; I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness." Here in the fourteenth verse.,

God promises that he will woo her, and in the latter part of the verse, he shows in what manner he will deal with her when he is about to woo or allure her. He would first bring her into the wilderness; that is, he would bring her into trouble and distress, and so humble her, and then allure her by speaking comfortably or pleasantly to her, as a young man does to a maid whom he woos. Then follow the words of the text.

1. We may observe what God would give to the children of Israel; viz. hope and comfort. He promises to give her vineyards; which being spiritually interpreted as most of the prophecies of gospel times are to be interpreted, signifies spiritual comforts. Vineyards afford wine, which is comfort to those who are of heavy hearts. Prov. xxxi. 6. "Give wine to those that are of heavy hearts." Wine is to make glad the heart of man. Psalm civ. 15. Gospel rest and peace are sometimes prophesied of, under the metaphor of every man's sitting under his vine and under his own fig-tree. God promises to give her hope, to open a door of hope for her, and to give her songs; that is, to give her spiritual joy, and both cause and disposition joyfully to sing praises to God.

2. We may observe after what manner God would bestow those benefits.

1. They should be given after great trouble and abasement. Before she had this hope and comfort given, she should be brought into great trouble and distress to humble her. He promises to give her her vineyards from thence; that is, from the wilderness spoken of in the foregoing verse, into which it is said that God would bring her, before he spoke comfortably to her. God would bring her into the wilderness, and then give her vineyards. God's bringing her into the wilderness was to humble her, and fit her to receive vineyards, and to make her see her dependence on God for them, that she might not attribute her enjoyment of them to her idols, as she had done before, for which reason God took them away, as in the twelfth verse. Hosea ii. 12. "And I will destroy her vines and her fig trees, whereof she hath said, These are my rewards that my lovers have given me; and I will make them a forest." There it is threatened that God will turn her vineyards into a forest, or wilderness. Here it is promised that he would turn the wilderness into vineyards, as Isaiah xxxii. 15. "Until the Spirit be poured on us from on high, and the wilderness be a fruitful field, and the fruitful field be counted for a forest." She should first be in a wilderness, where she shall see that she cannot help herself, nor any of her idols help, or give her any vineyards. And then God will help her, that she shall see that it is God, and not any of her

idols or lovers. God would first bring her into a wilderness, and thence give her vineyards, as God first brought the children of Israel into a dreadful wilderness. So God opened a door of hope to them in the valley of Achor, which is a word that signifies trouble, and was so called from the trouble which the children of Israel suffered by the sin of Achor. So God is wont first to make their sin a great trouble to them, an occasion of a great deal of distress, before he opens a door of hope. God promises to make her sing there as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt. This plainly refers to the joyful song which Moses and the children of Israel sang when they came up out of the Red sea. The children of Israel there had great joy and comfort; but just before they had great trouble. They had been in extreme distress by the oppression of their task-masters; and just before this triumphant song, they were brought to extremity and almost to despair, when Pharaoh and the Egyptians appeared ready to swallow them up.

2. This hope and comfort should be bestowed on the slaving and forsaking of sin. That is the troubler of the soul. It should be given in the valley of Achor, which was the valley where the troubler of Israel was slain, as you may see in Joshua vii. 26.; and the place where the children of Israel sang, when they came up out of the land of Egypt. The eastern shore of the Red sea was the place where they saw their enemies and old taskmasters, the types of men's lusts, which are sinners' taskmasters, lie dead on the sea-shore, and of whom they took their final leave. And God had told them, that their enemies whom they had seen that day, they should see no more for ever.

Doctrine

God is wont to cause hope and comfort to arise in the soul after trouble and humbling for sin, and according as the troubler is slain and forsaken. I would show, I. That it is thus with respect to the first true hope and comfort which is given to the soul at conversion.

II. That God is wont to bestow hope and comfort on Christians from time to time in this way.

I. God is wont to cause hope and comfort to arise to the soul in conversion after trouble and humbling for sin, and upon the slaying of the troubler.

1. It is God's manner to bestow hope and comfort on a soul in conversion after trouble and humbling for sin. Under this head are three things to be observed. 1. The trouble itself. 2. The cause, *viz.* sin. 3. The humbling.

1. Souls are wont to be brought into trouble before God bestows true hope and comfort. The corrupt hearts of men naturally incline to stupidity and senselessness before God comes with the awakening influences of his Spirit. They are quiet and secure; they have no true comfort and hope, and yet they are quiet; they are at ease. They are in miserable slavery, and yet seek not a remedy.

They say, as the children of Israel did in Egypt to Moses, "let us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians. " But if God has a design of mercy to them, it is his manner before he bestows true hope and comfort on them, to bring them into trouble, to distress them, and spoil their ease and false quietness, and to rouse them out of their old resting and sleeping places, and to bring them into a wilderness. They are brought into trouble, and sometimes into exceedingly great trouble and distress, so that they can take no comfort in those things in which they used to take comfort. Their hearts are pinched and stung, and they can find no ease in anything. They have, as it were, an arrow sticking fast in them, which causes grievous and continual pain, an arrow which they cannot shake off, or pull out. The pain and anguish of it drinks up their spirit. Their worldly enjoyments were a sufficient good before; but they are not now. They wander about with wounded hearts, seeking rest, and finding none; like one wandering in a dry and parched wilderness under the burning, scorching heat of the sun, seeking for some shadow where he may sit down and rest, but finding none. Wherever he goes the beams of the sun scorch him: or he seeks some fountain of cool water to quench his thirst, but finds not a drop. He is like David in his trouble, who wandered about in the wilderness, Saul pursuing him wherever he went, driving and hunting him from one wilderness to another, from one mountain to another, and from one cave to another, giving him no rest. To such sinners, all things look dark, and they know not what to do, nor whither to turn. If they look forward or backward, to the right hand or the left, all is gloom and perplexity. If they look to heaven, behold darkness; if they look to the earth, behold trouble, and darkness, and dimness of anguish. Sometimes they hope for relief, but they are disappointed, and so again and again they travail in pain, and a dreadful sound is in their ears. They are terrified and affrighted, and they seek refuge, as a poor

creature pursued by an enemy. He flies to one refuge and there is beset, and that fails; then he flies to another, and then is driven out of that. And his enemies grow thicker and thicker about, encompassing him on every side. They are like those of whom we read in Isa. xxiv. 17, 18. Fear, and the pit, and the snare are upon them, and when they flee from the noise of the fear they are taken in the pit; and if they come up out of the pit, they are taken in the snare. So that they know not what to do. They are like the children of Israel, while Achor troubled them. They go forth against their enemies, and they are smitten down and flee before them. They call on God, but he does not answer, nor seem to regard them. Sometimes they find something in which they take pleasure for a little time, but it soon vanishes away, and leaves them in greater distress than before. And sometimes they are brought to the very borders of despair. Thus they are brought into the wilderness, and into the valley of Achor, or of trouble.

2. Sin is the trouble or the cause of this trouble. Sin is the disease of the soul, and such a disease as will, if the soul is not benumbed, cause exceeding pain. Sin brings guilt, and that brings condemnation and wrath. All this trouble arises from conviction of sin. Awakened sinners are convinced that they are sinful. Before the sinner thought well of himself, or was not convinced that he was very sinful. But now he is led to reflect first on what he has done, how wickedly he has spent his time, what wicked acts or practices he has been guilty of. And afterwards in the progress of his awakenings he is made sensible of something of the sin and plague of his heart. They are made sensible of the guilt and wrath which sin brings. The threatenings of God's law are set home, and they are made sensible that God is angry, and that his wrath is dreadful. They are led to consider of the dreadfulness of that punishment, which God has threatened. The affection or principle, which is wrought upon to cause this trouble, is fear. They are afraid of the punishment of sin, and God's wrath for it. They are commonly afraid of many things here in this world as the fruit of sin. They are afraid that God will not hear their prayers, that he is so angry with them, that he will never give them converting grace. They are afraid oftentimes that they have committed the unpardonable sin, or at least that they have been guilty of such sin as God will never pardon; that their day is past, and that God has given them up to judicial hardness of heart and blindness of mind. Or if they are not already, they are afraid they shall be. They are afraid oftentimes, that the Spirit of God is not striving with them now, that their fears are from some other cause.

Sometimes they are afraid that it is only the devil, who terrifies and afflicts them; and that if the Spirit of God is striving with them, he will be taken from them, and they shall be left in a Christless state. They are afraid that if they seek salvation, it will be to no purpose, and that they shall only make their case worse and worse; that they are farther and farther from anything which is good, and that there is less probability now of their being converted, than when they began to seek. Sometimes they fear, that they have but a short time to live, and that God will soon cast them to hell; that none ever were as they are, who ever found mercy; that their case is peculiar, and that all wherein they differ from others is for the worse. They have fears on every side. Oftentimes they are afraid of everything. Everything looks dark, and they are afraid that everything will prove ruinous to them. But in the issue of all they are afraid they shall perish for ever. They are afraid that when they die they shall go down to hell, and there have their portion appointed them in everlasting burnings. This is the sum of all their fears.

And the cause of this fear is a consciousness of the guilt of sin. It is sin, which is the cruel task-master, which oppresses them, and chastises them; and sin is the cruel Pharaoh, which pursues them. As the children of Israel, before they came to sing with joy after they came out of the land of Egypt, were under great trouble from their task-masters, and sighed by reason of the hard bondage, and then were pursued, and put into dreadful fear at the Red sea. It was their taskmasters who made them all this trouble. So it is sin which makes all the trouble which a sinner suffers under awakenings.

Their trouble for sin is no gracious, godly sorrow for sin; for that does not arise merely from fear, but from love. It is not an evangelical, but legal, repentance of which we are speaking, which is not from love to God, but only self-love.

3. The end of this trouble in those to whom God designs mercy is to humble them. God leads them into the wilderness before he speaks comfortably to them, for the same cause that he led the children of Israel into the wilderness before he brought them into Canaan, which we are told was to humble them. Deut. viii. 2. "And thou shalt remember all the way, which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, and to know what was in thine heart." Man naturally trusts in himself, and magnifies himself. And for man to enjoy only ease and prosperity and quietness tends to nourish and establish such a disposition. Deut. xxxii. 15. "Jeshurun waxed fat, and kicked."

But by trouble and distress, and by a sense of a heavy load of guilt, God brings men down into the dust. God brings souls thus into the wilderness to show them their own helplessness, to let them see that they have nothing to which they can turn for help, to make them sensible that they are not rich and increased with goods, but wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked; to show them that they are utterly undone and ruined, to make them sensible of their exceeding wickedness, and to bring them to be sensible how justly God might cast them off for ever. Those legal troubles tend to show them their utter inability to help themselves, as their fears put them on using their utmost endeavours, and trying their utmost strength; and by continuing in that way their experience teaches them their weakness, and they find they can do nothing. It puts them upon repeated trials, and they have as repeated disappointments. But repeated disappointments tend to bring a man to give up the case, and to despair of help in that way in which he has tried for it. It tends to make men sensible of the utter insufficiency of their wisdom, and bring them to see their own exceeding blindness and ignorance. For fear, and concern, and distress, necessarily put a person on intensely thinking, and studying, and contriving for relief. But when men have been thus trying their own wisdom and invention to their utmost, and find it fails, and signifies nothing, and is altogether to no purpose, it makes them more and more sensible of their weakness and blindness, and brings them to confess themselves fools, and blind, as to those things which concern their relief. They are like one who is placed in the midst of a vast hideous wilderness. At first it may be he may not be sensible but that he knows the way home, and can directly go in the way which leads out of the wilderness. But after he has tried and has travelled awhile, and finds that he cannot find the way, and that he spends himself in vain, and only goes round and round, and comes to the same place again at last, he is brought to confess that he knows not where to go, nor what to do, and that he is sensible that he is like one who is perfectly lost, and altogether in darkness, and is brought at last to yield the case and stand still, and do nothing but call for help, that if possible any one may hear, and lead him in the wilderness. For this end God leads men into the wilderness before he speaks comfortably to them. The troubles which they have for sin tend to bring them to be sensible how justly God may cast them off for ever; and this brings them to reflect on their sins; for these are the things of which they are afraid. When a man is terribly afraid of things with which he is surrounded, this engages his eyes to behold; he looks intensely on them, and sees more and more how frightful and terrible they are. When

they are in fear, they take much more notice of their sins than at other times. They think more how wickedly they have lived, and observe more the corrupt and wicked working of their own hearts, and so are more and more sensible what vile creatures they are. This makes them more and more sensible how angry God is, and how terrible his anger is. They try to appease and to reconcile God by their own righteousness, but it fails. God still appears as an angry God, refusing to hear their prayers, or appear for their help, till they despair in their own righteousness, and yield the case; and by more and more of a sight of themselves are brought to confess that they lie justly exposed to damnation, and have nothing by which to defend themselves. God appears more and more as a terrible being to them, till they have done with any imaginations, that they have anything sufficient to recommend them, or reconcile them to such a God. Thus God is wont first to bring the soul into trouble by reason of sin, and so to humble the soul, before he gives true hope and comfort in conversion.

4. This hope and comfort are given upon the slaying of the troubler. Whatever troubles there are for sin, yet if the troubler is not slain, it cannot be expected but that there will be trouble still. Before there will be no true comfort. The soul may return to stupidity and carelessness, and may receive a false peace and hope, and sin be kept alive; but no true hope. Persons may be exceedingly troubled for sin, and yet sin be saved alive. Persons may seem to lament they have done thus and thus, and weep many tears, and cry out of their sinfulness and wickedness, and yet the life of sin be whole in them. But if so, they never shall receive true comfort. They may refrain from sin; there may be a great reformation, and exact life for a time; or there may be a total reformation of some particular ways of sin, and yet no true hope; because sin is only restrained; it is not slain. Many men are brought to restrain sin, and to give it slight wounds, who cannot be brought to kill it. Wicked men are loath to kill sin. They have been very good friends to it ever since they have been in the world, and have always treated it as one of their most familiar and best friends. They have allowed it the best room in their hearts, and have given it the best entertainment they could, and they are very loth to destroy it. But until this be done, God never will give them true comfort. If ever men come to have a true hope, they must do as the children of Israel did by Achan. Joshua vii. 24, 25, 26. "And Joshua and all Israel with him took Achan, the son of Zerah, and the silver and the garment, and the wedge of gold, and his sons and his daughters, and his oxen, and his asses, and his sheep, and his tent, and all that he had; and

they brought them unto the valley of Achor. And Joshua said, why hast thou troubled us? The Lord shall trouble thee this day. And all Israel stoned him with stones, and burned them with fire after they had stoned them with stones. And they raised over him a great heap of stones unto this day. So the Lord turned from the fierceness of his anger. Wherefore the name of that place was called the valley of Achor unto this day.” So if ever men come to have any true hope, they must take sin which is the troubler, and all which belongs to it, even that which seems most dear and precious, though it be as choice as Achan’s silver and wedge of gold, and utterly destroy them, and burn them with fire, to be sure to make a thorough end of them, as it were, bury them and raise over them a great heap of stones, to lay a great weight upon them, to make sure of it that they shall never rise more. Yea, and thus they must serve all his sons and daughters. They must not save some of the accursed brood alive. All the fruits of sin must be forsaken. There must not be some particular lust, some dear sinful enjoyment, some pleasant child of sin, spared; but all must be stoned and burned. If we do thus, we may expect to have trouble cease, and light to arise, as it was in the camp of Israel after slaying the troubler.

Inquiry. Here it may be inquired, What is implied in slaying sin at conversion? And it implies these several things: 1. There must be a conviction of the evil of it as against God. All is carried on by conviction. Those legal troubles, which are before conversion, arise from some conviction of the being of sin, and the guilt and danger of it. And the slaying of sin is by conviction of its evil and hateful nature. To slay the troubler, we must find him out, as the children of Israel did before they slew Achan. They rose early in the morning, and searched, and brought all Israel by their tribes; and then searched the tribe, which was taken by families, and the family by particular persons, and so found him.

2. It is to have the heart turned from, and turned against, it in hatred. The troubler is never slain, but by a thorough and saving change of heart and renovation of nature, so that that which before loved sin and chose it, may now hate and abhor it, and may disrelish it, and all its ways, and especially hate their former ways of sin.

3. Forsaking and renouncing it. Let men pretend what they may, their hearts are not turned from sin, if they do not forsake it. He is not converted, who is not really come to a disposition utterly to forsake all ways of sin. If ever sinners have true hope and comfort, they must take a final leave of sin, as the children of Israel did of the Egyptians at the Red

sea. Persons may have a great deal of trouble from sin, and many conflicts and struggles with it, and seem to forsake it for a time, and yet not forsake it finally; as the children of Israel had with the Egyptians. They had a long struggle with them before they were freed from them. How many judgments did God bring upon the Egyptians, before they would let them go? And sometimes Pharaoh seemed as if he would let them go; but yet when it came to the proof he refused. And when they departed from Rameses doubtless they thought then they had got rid of them. They did not expect to see them anymore. But when they arrived at the Red sea, and looked behind them, they saw them pursuing them. They found it a difficult thing wholly to get rid of them. But when they were drowned in the Red sea, then they took an everlasting leave of them. The king and all the chiefs of them were dead; and therefore God said to them, Exod. xiv. 13. "The Egyptians, whom ye have seen to-day, ye shall see them again no more for ever." So sinners must not only part with sin for a little time, but they must forsake it for ever, and be willing never to see or have anything to do with their old sinful ways and enjoyments. They must forsake that which is their iniquity, the sin which most easily besets them, and to which by their constitution or custom they have been most addicted, which has been, as it were, the dearest of all, and most respected, as a king among the army of sins; though that must be slain too, as Pharaoh, the king of the Egyptians, was in the Red sea. And we must not do as Saul did, when God sent him to kill the Amalekites; but he saved the king of the Amalekites alive, which cost him his kingdom.

4. It implies embracing Christ, and trusting in him as the Saviour from sin. We must look to him not only as a Saviour from the punishment of sin, but we must receive and embrace him as a Saviour from sin itself. We cannot deliver ourselves from sin. We cannot slay this enemy of ourselves. He is too strong an enemy for us. We can no more slay sin ourselves, than the children of Israel, who were themselves a poor feeble company, a mixed multitude, unprepared to resist such a force, could themselves slay Pharaoh, and all his mighty army with chariots and horsemen. It was Christ in the pillar of cloud and fire, who fought for them. They had nothing to do but trust in him. Exod. xiv. 4. "The Lord shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace." They could never have drowned the Egyptians in the sea. It was Christ who did it; for the pillar of cloud stood between them and the Israelites, and when they were up out of the sea, then Christ brought on them the waters of the sea. Our enemies must be drowned in the all-sufficient fountain, and, as it were, sea of Christ's

blood, as the Egyptians were in the Red sea, and then we may sing, as the children of Israel did in the day when they came up out of the land of Egypt. When sin is thus slain, then God is wont to open a door of hope, a door through which there flashes a sweet light out of heaven upon the soul. Then comfort arises, and then is there a new song in the mouth, even praise unto God.

II. God is wont to bestow hope and comfort from time to time in the same manner on Christians. In the consideration of this matter I would show,

1. That Christians are frequently in darkness, and their hope is often greatly obscured.
2. That it is sin which is the occasion of this darkness.
3. Their darkness is not perpetual, but God is wont to cause hope and comfort to arise again.
4. Their trouble is commonly much increased a little before the renewal of light and hope.
5. That hope and comfort are renewed to them on the slaying of the troubler.

1. It is often the case that Christians are under darkness, and their hope is greatly clouded. God is wont to give his saints hope and comfort at their first conversion, which sometimes remains without any great interruption for a considerable time. And some Christians live abundantly more in the light than others. Some for many years together have but little darkness. God is pleased to distinguish them from their neighbours. He mercifully keeps them from those occasions of darkness, into which he suffers others to fall, and gives them of the light of his countenance. God exercises his sovereignty in this matter, as he does in giving converting grace: as he bestows that on whom he pleases, so he bestows on some of those who are converted more light, on others less, according as it pleases him. But many Christians meet with a great deal of darkness, and see times in which their hopes are much clouded. Sometimes the sweet and comfortable influences of God's Spirit are withdrawn. They were wont to have spiritual discoveries made of God and Christ to their souls, but now they have none. Their minds seem to be darkened, and they cannot see spiritual things, as they have done in times past. Formerly, when they read the Scriptures, they used often to have light come in, and they seemed to have an understanding and relish for what they read, and were filled with comfort. But now when they read, it is all a dead letter, and they have no taste for it, and are obliged to force themselves to read; they seem to have no

pleasure in it, but it is a mere task and burden. Formerly they used to have passages of Scripture come to their minds, when they were not reading, which brought much light and sweetness with them. But now they have none. Formerly they used to feel the sweet exercises of grace. They could trust in God, and could find a spirit of resignation to his will, and had love drawn forth, and sweet longings after God and Christ, and a sweet complacency in God; but now they are dull and dead. Formerly they used to meet with God in the ordinances of his house: it was sweet to sit and hear the word preached, and it seemed to bring light and life with it; they used to feel life and sweetness in public prayers, and their hearts were elevated in singing God's praises. But now it is otherwise. Formerly they used to delight in the duty of prayer: the time which they spent in their closet between God and their own souls was sweet to them. But now when they go thither, they do not meet God; and they take no delight in drawing near to God in their closets. When they do pray, it seems to be a mere lifeless, heartless performance. They utter such and such words, but they seem to be nothing but words; their hearts are not engaged. Their minds are continually wandering and going to and fro, after one vanity and another. With this decay of the exercise of grace their hope greatly decays; and the evidences of their piety are exceedingly clouded. When they look into their hearts, it seems to them that they can see nothing there, from which they should hope; and when they consider after what manner they live, it seems to them to argue, that they have no grace. They have but little of anything which is new, to furnish comfortable evidence to them of their good estate; and as to their old evidences, they are greatly darkened. Their former experience, in which they took great comfort, looks dim, and a great way off, and out of sight to them. They have almost forgotten it, and have no pleasure in thinking or speaking of it. And sometimes true Christians are brought into terrible distress. They are not only deprived of their former comforts, and have their former hopes obscured, but they have inward distressing darkness. God does not only hide his face, but they have a sense of his anger. He seems to frown upon them. So it appears to have been with David. Ps. xlii. 7. "Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts; all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me." So with Heman. Ps. lxxxviii. 6, 7. "Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit, in darkness, in the deeps. Thy wrath lieth hard upon me, and thou hast afflicted me with all thy waves."

2. It is sin which is the occasion of this trouble and darkness. Whenever the godly meet with such darkness, there is some Achan in their souls which is the occasion of all this; and this is sin. This is the occasion of the darkness of the godly, as well as the troubles which natural men have under awakenings. It is not for want of love in God towards his saints, or readiness to grant comfort to them; neither is God's hand shortened, that it cannot save, nor his ear heavy, that he cannot hear. It is their sin which hides God's face from them. Isa. lix. 1, 2. Sin is the occasion of this darkness of the saints, in these three ways.

1. Sometimes it is owing to the weakness and small degree of grace infused in conversion, and the strength of remaining corruption. The work of God is the same in all who are converted, so far that their sin is mortified, and that which reigned before does not reign now. The heart is changed from darkness to light, and from death to life, and turned from sin to God. And yet the work is very different with respect to the degree of mortification of sin, and the degree of grace which is infused. Some have more spiritual light given in their first conversion than others; have greater discoveries, and are brought at once to a much greater acquaintance with God, and have their hearts more humbled, and more weaned from sin and the world, and more filled with the love of God and Christ, and are brought nearer to heaven than others. Some at first conversion have a much more eminent work of grace in their hearts than others. Some have emphatically but little grace infused, and consequently their corruptions are left in much greater strength: when it is so, it is no wonder that such have a weaker hope, and less light and comfort, than others. The natural tendency of indwelling sin in the saints, is to cloud and darken the mind; and therefore, the more of it remains, the more will it have this effect. Persons can know their own good estate in no other way than by seeking, or perceiving grace in their hearts. But certainly the less of it there is, with the more difficulty will it be seen or felt. As indwelling sin prevails, so does it the more obscure and cloud grace, as a great smoke clouds and hides a spark. And therefore the more there is of this indwelling sin, the more will grace be hid. The greater the strength in which corruption is left, the more rare will be the good frames which the godly have, and the more frequent and of longer continuance will be their times of darkness. It may be, the darkness with which the saints meet, is from some particular corruption, which has always hitherto been in too great prevalence and strength, and has never yet been mortified to such a degree, but that it continues a great troubler in the soul. Grace being

weak, the sin of the constitution takes advantage, whether that be a proud and haughty temper, or a covetous spirit, or an addictedness to some sensuality, or a peevish, fretful, discontented spirit, or ill temper, or a quarrelsome spirit, or disposition to high resentment. Or whether it be any other corrupt disposition, which is the sin to which they are chiefly exposed by natural temper, or by their education and former custom. If the grace which is infused at conversion, be comparatively weak, this constitutional sin will take the advantage, and will dreadfully cloud the mind, and hinder spiritual comfort, and bring trouble and darkness. There is a great variety in the work of grace upon men's hearts, as to the particular discoveries which are then given, and the particular graces which are in chief exercise; whereby it comes to pass, that some in their conversion are more assisted against one corruption and others against another. Some in their conversion, as well as in the manner of their experience from time to time, have more of the exercise of one grace, and others more sensible exercises of another. And whatever that grace be of which they have the most lively exercises, they are thereby most assisted against that particular corruption which is its opposite. Hence some particular corruptions may be left in much greater prevalence than others, and so be a greater occasion of darkness. Thus some, in the particular experiences which they have, may not be so especially assisted against pride as others, whereby their pride may take occasion to work. And when they have had spiritual discoveries and comfort, they may be lifted up with them. And this may be an occasion of displeasing and grieving his Holy Spirit, and so of their having a great deal of darkness. They may not have seen so much of their own emptiness as some others, and so their corruption may work much more by self-confidence than others; and no wonder that self-confident persons meet with darkness. No wonder that when men trust in themselves for light and grace, that their confidence fails, and they go without that for which they trusted in themselves.

2. Sometimes the saints are in great darkness on occasion of some gross transgression into which they have fallen. So it was with David, when he fell into gross sin in the matter of Uriah. He exceedingly quenched the influences of the Spirit of God by it, and God withdrew those influences from him, and the comforts which they had imparted; as appears by his earnestly praying for their restoration. Psal. li. 12. "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation,

and uphold me with thy free Spirit.” When Christians fall into gross transgression, it is commonly the fact that an exceedingly deep darkness follows.

3. When they do not fall into any particular gross and scandalous transgression, yet they sometimes exceedingly darken their minds by corrupt frames and evil habits, into which they fall. There is much remaining corruption in the hearts of Christians, and oftentimes they get into very ill frames. Some particular corruptions grow very prevalent. Sometimes they grow proud and conceited of themselves, either on account of their own godliness, and the good opinion others have of them, or on some other account. Sometimes they fall into a worldly frame, and spiritual things grow more tasteless to them, and their hearts are desperately bent on the acquisition of worldly good. Sometimes their minds grow light and vain, and their affections are wholly fixed on the vanities of youth, on dress, and gaiety, and fashion. Some, because their minds are not occupied as once they were, with spiritual enjoyments and delights, sweetly meditating on heavenly things, breathing and longing after them, and earnestly seeking them, become the slaves of their sensual appetites. Others grow contentious and quarrelsome, are often angry with those around them, and cherish habitual rancour against them in their hearts. They become wilful and obstinate, and stir up strife, and oppose others with vehemence; determining at all hazards to carry their own measures, and delighting to have those who oppose them defeated and humbled. It hurts them to have others prosper. Their minds and hearts are full of turmoil, and heat, and vehemence against one and another. Others fall into a discontented, fretful, and impatient frame at the disposals of Providence. And oftentimes many of these things go together. And as these persons sink into such unhappy frames in their hearts, so they pursue very sinful courses of conduct. They behave themselves unsuitably, so as to dishonour God, and greatly to wound religion. They do not appear to others to savour of a good spirit. They fall into the practice of allowing themselves too great liberties in indulging their sensual appetites, in the gratification of covetousness and pride, in strife, backbiting, and a violent pursuit after the world. They slide into those corrupt frames and evil ways commonly by means of their first giving way to a slothful spirit. They are not so diligent and earnest in religion as they once were; but indulge their slothful disposition, and discontinue their watch, and so lie open to temptation. Thus ill frames imperceptibly creep upon them, and they insensibly more and more fall into sinful practices. So it was with David. Their sin, into which they fall in

consequence of this degenerate and sinful state of the affections and the life, is the occasion of a great deal of darkness. God withdraws his Spirit from them, their light goes out, and the evidences of their piety grow dim and obscure. They seem to be in a great measure as they were before they were converted, and they have no sensible communion with God. Thus sin is the occasion of trouble and darkness to the Christian. When it is thus with Christians, their trouble is commonly greatly increased a little before the renewal of hope and comfort. When sin prevails, as has been said, in the hearts of Christians, they are not wont to be easy and quiet like secure sinners. There is commonly more or less of an inward struggling and uneasiness. Grace in the heart, though it be dreadfully oppressed, and, as it were, overwhelmed, yet will be resisting its enemy and struggling for liberty. So that it is not with Christians in their ill frames, and under the prevalence of corruption, altogether as it is with carnal, wicked men, who are secure. And there is this good reason for it, that the former have a principle of spiritual life in their souls, which the latter have not. Yet Christians in their ill frames may fall into a great deal of security and senselessness; for sin is of a stupefying nature, and wherever it prevails, will have more or less of that effect. When they fall into a sinful, worldly, proud, or contentious frame, they are wont to have a great degree of senselessness and stupidity with it. And especially when they fall into gross sins, has it a tendency greatly to stupefy the soul. It obviously had this effect on David. He seems to have been strangely stupefied, when Nathan came to him with the parable of the rich man, who injuriously took the poor man's ewe lamb from him. He was enraged with the man in the parable, but did not seem to reflect on himself, or think how parallel his case was with his. And while they are thus senseless, their trouble is not so great; and if they feel the weight of sin it is not so burdensome to them. But God is wont, before he renews comfort and hope to them, to bring them into greater trouble. As a sinner before his first comfort in his conversion is brought into trouble, so it is wont to be with the saints after their backslidings and decays, before renewed hope and comfort is granted. There is a work of awakening wrought upon them. While they remain in their corrupt frames, they are, as it were, asleep. They are like the ten foolish virgins who slumbered and slept; and as persons who are asleep, they are unconscious, not sensible where they are, nor what are their circumstances. Therefore when God is coming and returning to them by his Spirit, commonly his first work upon them is a work of awakening, to wake them out of sleep, and rouse them to some sensibility, to make them sensible of the great folly of their ways, and

how they have displeased and offended God, and what mischief they have done. Thus God leads them into the wilderness, and brings them into the valley of Achor or trouble. Then they are in greater trouble than they were before, and have more sensible darkness and more distress abundantly. But yet it is really much better with them now, than before they began to come to themselves. Their circumstances are much more eligible and more hopeful, though sometimes they are in distress almost insupportable. And a little before God renews light and comfort, they have a very great sense of God's anger, and his wrath lies heavy upon them. So it seems to have been with David a little before the restoration of spiritual comfort to him, which made him speak of the bones which God had broken, when he was praying for the renewal of comfort. Psal. li. 8. "Make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice." And probably he has respect to the same thing in Psal. xxxviii. which he calls his psalm to bring to remembrance. Ver. 2, 3, 4. "Thine arrows stick fast in me, and thy hand presseth me sore. There is no soundness in my flesh, because of thine anger; neither is there any rest in my bones, because of my sin. For mine iniquities are gone over mine head; as an heavy burden they are too heavy for me" And often when God is about to bring them to themselves, and to restore comfort to them, he first brings them into some very great and sore temporal calamity and trouble, and awakens them by that, and in this first brings them into the wilderness before he speaks comfortably to them. Job xxxiii. 16., &c. "Then he openeth the ears of men, and sealeth their instruction, that he may withdraw man from his purpose, and hide pride from man. He keepeth back his soul from the pit, and his life from perishing by the sword. He is chastened also with pain upon his bed, and the multitude of his bones with strong pain; so that his life abhorreth bread, and his soul dainty meat. His flesh is consumed away, that it cannot be seen; and his bones, that were not seen, stick out. Yea, his soul draweth near unto the grave, and his life to the destroyers. If there be a messenger with him, an interpreter, one among a thousand, to show unto man his uprightness, then he is gracious unto him, and saith, Deliver him from going down to the pit; I have found a ransom. His flesh shall be fresher than a child's; he shall return to the days of his youth. He shall pray unto God, and he shall be favourable unto him, and he shall see his face with joy; for he will render unto man his righteousness. He looketh upon men, and if any say, I have sinned, and perverted that which was right, and it profited me not, he will deliver his soul from going into the pit, and his life shall see the light. Lo, all these things worketh God oftentimes with man, to

bring back his soul from the pit, to be enlightened with the light of the living.” Thus those who are very weak in grace sometimes meet with great and sore trouble, both of body and mind, which is an occasion of a new work, as it were, of grace upon their hearts; so that they are more eminent saints afterwards, and have much more comfort.

3. When the saints are in darkness, their darkness is not perpetual, but God will restore hope and comfort to them again. When one of Christ’s sheep wanders away, and gets into the wilderness, Christ the good Shepherd will not leave him in the wilderness, but will seek him, and will lay him on his shoulders, and bring him home again. We cannot tell how long God may leave his saints in the dark, but yet surely their darkness shall not last for ever; for light is sown to the righteous, and gladness to the upright in heart. Psal. xcvi. 11. God, in the covenant of grace in which they have an interest, has promised them joy and comfort; he has promised them everlasting joy. Isa. lxi. 7. Satan may be suffered for a time to bring them into darkness, but they shall be brought out again. God may be provoked to hide his face from them for a time; and if it seems long, yet it is indeed but a little time. Isa. liv. 7, 8. “For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee. In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee.” Psal. xxx. 5. “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.”

5. Hope and comfort are renewed to them on the slaying of the troubler. All sin is truly mortified in conversion, or has its death-wounds then. And all the exercises of it afterwards are, in some respects, as the efforts and struggling of a dying enemy. But yet all life is not actually extinct, and therefore it needs to be further mortified, to receive more deadly wounds. Sin is slain in the godly after trouble and darkness, and before the renewing of comfort, in these three ways.

1. It is slain as to former degrees of it. All remains of corruption are not extirpated. Sin does not cease to be in the heart; but it ceases to be any more in such strength as it has been; it ceases to have that prevalence.

2. It is slain as to former ways of exercise. The former ways of sin are forsaken. They are further afterwards from such ways of sin than ever before. The heart is fortified against them. Thus if a godly man has been in a way of contention and strife, when he comes to himself again, he slays his contention; he kills sin as to that way of exercising it. Or if it be

some way of sensuality, when he comes to himself, he will slay his sensuality, and cast it out from him.

3. It is totally and perfectly slain in his will and inclination. There is that renewed opposition made against it, which implies a mortal inclination and design against it. What the saint seeks when he comes to himself after a time of great declension is to be the death of sin, which has been so prevalent in him, and perfectly to extirpate it. He acts in what he does as a mortal enemy; and if he does not perfectly destroy it at one blow, it is not for want of inclination, but for want of strength. The godly man does not deal mercifully and tenderly with sin, but as far as in him lies, he deals with it as the children of Israel dealt with Achan, as it were, stones it with stones, and burns it with fire with all which belongs to it. They do not at all spare it, as wicked men do; they aim at the very life, and nothing short of it. The saints' slaying the troubler after great backslidings and ill frames, implies the following things.

1. There is a conviction of the evil of their sin. They are brought to consideration. They think on their ways before they turn their feet. Psal. cxix. 59. They consider how they have behaved themselves, how unworthily, how unfaithful they have been to their profession, how ungratefully, and disagreeably to the mercies they have received. They consider how they have provoked God, and have deserved his wrath. They find the troubler led them to see a great deal more of the sinfulness and corruption of their hearts commonly than before. In this respect the work of God with saints after great declining is agreeable to his work in the heart of a natural man in order to his conversion.

2. There is a gracious humiliation of soul before God for it. The gracious soul, when convinced of sin after great declensions, and recovered out of them, is deeply humbled; for it is brought to the dust before God. There is an evangelical repentance; the heart is broken for sin. That sacrifice is offered to God, which David offered rather than burnt-offerings after his great fall. Psal. li. 16, 17. "For thou desirest not sacrifice, else would I give it; thou delightest not in burnt-offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise." They are brought as Job was, after he had sinned, in complaining of God's dealings with him, to abhor themselves. Job xlii. 6. And they are in a meeker frame, as the Christian Corinthians were, after they had greatly gone out of the way, and had been reprov'd by the apostle Paul. 2 Cor. vii. 11. "For behold the self-

same thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea what clearing of yourselves, yea what indignation, yea what fear, yea what vehement desire, yea what zeal, yea what revenge.” They were filled with sorrow, and with a kind of indignation, zeal, and spirit of revenge against themselves for their folly, and so ungratefully treating God. When Christians are convinced of their sin after remarkable miscarriages and ill frames, they are commonly convinced of many of the same things of which they were convinced under their first humiliation, but to a greater degree than ever before. They are brought to a new conviction, and a greater conviction than ever before, of their own emptiness, and to be sensible what poor, feeble, helpless creatures, and what sinful, vile, utterly unworthy creatures, they are; how undeserving they are of any mercy, and now much they deserve God’s wrath. And this conviction works by a gracious humbling of the soul. The grace of humility is greatly increased by it, and very commonly they are more poor in spirit and lowly of heart during all their future life. They see more what cause there is for them to lay their hands on their mouths, and to walk humbly with God, and lie low before him.

3. There is a renewed application to Christ as a Saviour from sin. There is a renewed act of reliance on him for justification, of faith in his blood to cleanse them, and of trust in his righteousness to cover their nakedness and filthiness. And Christ as a Saviour becomes more precious to them. As they have a greater sense of their own emptiness and vileness, so they have a more entire dependence on Christ’s fullness.

4. The heart is farther separated from those ways of sin, and more confirmed against them, than ever. After it they commonly have a greater dread of it, and greater abhorrence, look upon it more as an enemy, and remember what they have suffered from it; and their hearts are more confirmed against it than ever. They have stronger resolutions to all which savours of the like, and all which might lead to it. Therefore this is mentioned among the effects of the repentance of the Corinthians after their going astray. “What carefulness it wrought in you, yea what clearing; of yourselves, yea what fear, yea what earnest desire.” There was a more than ordinary fear and dread of the like sin for the future, and more carefulness to shun it, and a more earnest desire of the contrary. The work of God in the heart of a saint after declension oftentimes, in many respects, resembles the work of God in a sinner at his conversion; though it is not in all respects like it, because of the great difference in the

subject. When the troubler comes to be thus slain after times of trouble and darkness in the godly, then God is wont to open a door of hope. The darkness which has covered them, which was greatest a little before, is now scattered, and light arises. It may be before there had been a long night of clouds and darkness. But now the clouds begin to scatter, and the sweet refreshing beams begin to break forth, and come down into the heart. The soul, which has been wounded, is now healed. God pours in the oil of comfort. The renewed sense, which is given, of Christ's fullness and sufficiency, gives new life and hope and joy. The troubler being slain, God now grants renewed discoveries of his glory, and renewed manifestations of his grace; and the soul, which was before in darkness, is now entertained with sweet views. And now that hope, which was so weakened, and was almost ready to fail, is revived, and greatly confirmed. Now the soul is enabled to take comfort in the promises. Now the saint sees evidences of his own good estate by the renewed manifestations which God makes of himself, and renewed exercises of grace. Before the soul was greatly exercised with doubts and fears and dark clouds; and much time was spent in reviewing past experiences, and looking over and examining those things which were formerly regarded as evidences of piety; and all in vain. They pored on past experiences, but to no satisfaction. And the reason was, the troubler was not slain, but still remained alive. But now God gives them new light, and new experiences, which in a few moments do more towards scattering their clouds, and removing their fears, than all their poring on past experiences could do for months, and probably for years. Before their hearts seemed in a great measure dead as to spiritual exercises. But now there is, as it were, new life. Now when they read the Scripture, and when they hear the word preached, it is with a savour and relish of it. Now they can find God in his word and ordinances. Now Christ comes to them, and manifests himself to them, and they are admitted again to communion with God. When Christians have comfort and hope thus renewed, their comforts are commonly purer than ever. Their joys are more humble joys, freer from any mixture and taint of self-righteousness, than before. Having thus shown that God is wont to cause hope and comfort to arise to the soul after trouble and humbling for sin, and upon slaying the troubler, both at first conversion and afterwards, after sad declinings, I would now give the reasons of the doctrine.

1. I would show why God is wont to give comfort after trouble and humbling for sin; or why he is wont to bring the soul into the wilderness before he speaks comfortably to it, and leads it into the valley of Achor, before he opens a door of hope.

1. It is that the soul may be prepared for a confiding application of itself to Christ for comfort. It is the will of God that men should have true hope and comfort conferred upon them in no other way, than by Jesus Christ. It is only by him that sinners have comfort at their conversion; and it is by him only that the saints have renewed hope and comfort after their declensions. And therefore the way to obtain this comfort is to look to him, to fly for refuge to him. And in order to this, persons have need to be brought to a sense of their necessity of him. And that they may be so, it is needful that they should be sensible of their calamity and misery, that they should be in trouble, and be brought to see their utter helplessness in themselves. And not only natural men, but Christians also, who are fallen into sin, and are in a dead and senseless frame, need something to make them more sensible of their necessity of Christ. Indeed the best are not so sensible of their need of Christ but that they need to be made more sensible; but especially those who are in ill and dead frames, and a declining state, need trouble and humbling to make them sensible of their need of Christ, and to prepare their minds for a renewed confiding application to Christ as their only remedy. The godly in such a case are sick with a sore disease, and Christ is the only Physician who can heal them; and they need to be sensible of their disease, that they may see their need of a physician. They, as well as natural men, need to be in a storm and tempest to make them sensible of their need to fly to him who is a hiding-place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest. A Christian, who wanders away from God, is like Noah's dove, which flew from the ark. She flew about till weary and spent, seeking rest somewhere else, but found no rest for the sole of her foot, and then she returned to the ark. So it is needful that the soul of a godly man, who wanders from Christ, should become weary, and find no rest for the sole of his foot, that so he may see his need of returning to Christ. Therefore it is said concerning the children of Israel in Hosea ii. 6. "Therefore, behold, I will hedge up thy way with thorns, and make a wall that she shall not find her paths." And in our context, Hosea ii.

7. "She shall follow after her lovers, but she shall not overtake them; and she shall seek them, but shall not find them. Then shall she say, I will go and return to my first husband,

for then was it better with me than now.” When gracious souls wander from Christ, their husband, following after other lovers, God is wont to bring them into trouble and distress, and make them see, that their other lovers cannot help them, that so they may see, that it is best for them to return to their first husband.

2. Another end of God in it is, that comfort and hope may be the more prized when obtained. We see in temporal things, that the worth and value of any enjoyment is learned by the want of it. He who is sick, knows the worth of health. He who is in pain, knows how to prize ease. He who is in a storm at sea, knows how to prize safety on shore. And people who are subject to the grievances of war, know how to value peace. He who endures the hardships of captivity and slavery, is thereby taught how to value liberty. And so it is in spiritual things. He who is brought to see his misery in being without hope, is prepared to prize hope when obtained. He who is brought into distress through fear of hell and God’s wrath, is the more prepared to prize the comfort which arises from the manifestation of the favour of God, and a sense of safety from hell. He who is brought to see his utter emptiness and extreme poverty and necessity, and his perishing condition on that account, is thoroughly prepared to prize and rejoice in the manifestation of a fullness in Christ. And those godly persons who are fallen into corrupt and senseless frames, greatly stand in need of something to make them more sensible of their want of spiritual comfort and hope. Their living as they do shows that they have too little sense of the worth and value of that comfort, and those inestimable spiritual and saving blessings, which God has bestowed upon them; otherwise they never would deal so ungratefully with God, who has bestowed them. If they did not greatly err in slighting spiritual comfort, as the children of Israel did manna, their hearts would never, to such a degree, have gone out after vanity, and earthly enjoyments, and carnal delights. They need to be brought into trouble and darkness to make them sensible of the worth of hope and comfort, and to teach them to prize it. They need to be brought into the wilderness, and left for a time to wander and suffer hunger and thirst in a barren desert, to teach them how to prize their vineyards. A sense of the pardon of sin, and the favour of God, and a hope of eternal life, do not afford comfort and joy to the soul any farther than they are valued and prized. So that the trouble and darkness which go before comfort, serve to render the joy and comfort the greater when obtained, and so are in mercy to those for whom God intends comfort.

3. It is so ordered that divine power and grace may be acknowledged in giving hope and comfort. There is naturally in men an exceeding insensibility of their dependence on God, and a great disposition to ascribe those things which they enjoy to themselves, or to second causes. This disposition reigns in natural men. They are wholly under the power of it. Therefore they need to be taught their own helplessness, and utter insufficiency, and utter unworthiness. Otherwise, if hope and comfort should be bestowed upon them, they would surely ascribe all to themselves, or the creature, and so would be lifted up by it, and would not give God the glory. Therefore it is God's manner first to humble sinners before he comforts them. And all this self-confident disposition is not extirpated out of the hearts of the godly, and especially when they get into ill frames does it prevail. And it is very requisite, that before any remarkable comfort is bestowed upon them, they should be the subjects of renewed humbling. They need renewedly to see what helpless creatures they are, that so, when light is bestowed, they may be sensible how it is owing to God, and not to themselves, or any other; and that they may, by their troubles and humblings, be prepared the more to admire God's power and mercy, and free and rich grace to them. While men are continued in fullness in a fruitful land, they will not learn their own helplessness; and therefore God will cast them out of this fullness into a wilderness. This is plainly intimated to be the reason of God's so dealing with the children of Israel, as is said in the text. The church of Israel, before God thus led her into the wilderness, did not ascribe her comforts to God, as in the eighth verse. "For she did not know that I gave her corn, and wine, and oil, and multiplied her silver and gold." But they ascribed them to her idols. Verse fifth. "For she said, I will go after my lovers, that give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, mine oil and my drink." And verse twelfth. "These are my rewards, that my lovers have given me." For this reason it is that God takes away those things, as in verse ninth. "Therefore will I return and take away my corn in the time thereof, and my wine in the season thereof, and will recover my wool and my flax given to cover her nakedness." And verses 11, 12. "I will also cause all her mirth to cease, her feast days, her new moons, and her Sabbaths, and all her solemn feasts. And I will destroy her vines and her fig-trees, whereof she hath said, these are my rewards that my lovers have given me; and I will make them a forest, and the beasts of the field shall eat them." God took them away, and turned her vineyards into a forest, and made her sensible that they were from him; and then he restored them again. For these reasons God is wont to bring souls into trouble, and to humble them for sin before he comforts

them. I proceed, to give the reasons why hope and comfort are not obtained till sin, which is the troubler, is slain.

1. While sin is harboured and preserved alive, it tends to provoke God to frown and express his anger. Sin is God's mortal enemy. It is that which his soul infinitely hates, and to which he is an irreconcilable enemy. And therefore if we harbour this, and suffer it to live in our hearts, and to govern our practice, we can expect no other than that it will provoke God's frowns. Spiritual comfort consists in the manifestation of God's favour, and in friendly communion with God. But how can we expect this at the same time that we harbour his mortal enemy? We see what God said to Joshua, while Achan was alive. Josh. vii. 12. "Neither will I be with you any more, except ye destroy the accursed thing from among you."

2. The natural tendency of sin is to darken the mind, and trouble the conscience. There is nothing which wounds a well-informed conscience but sin. Sin is the enemy of grace, and therefore the natural tendency of it is to oppose and keep down the exercises of grace, and so to extinguish spiritual comfort; for spiritual comfort comes in no other way than by the exercise of grace. That which prevents the exercises of grace darkens the evidences of a man's good estate. For there are no evidences of this but the exercises of grace. Sin does as much tend to keep out spiritual comfort, as clouds tend to hide the light of the sun. And therefore it is necessary that this should be removed in order to our receiving light and comfort. It is impossible in its own nature that any should have spiritual light and comfort before sin is mortified. If sinners had comfort while sin is in reigning power, it could not be spiritual comfort; for spiritual comfort is the same with gracious comfort. But now can there be gracious comfort where grace has no place? But if there be grace, sin will not be in reigning power; for the nature of grace is to mortify sin. And as there can be no spiritual comfort without a degree of mortification of sin in those in whom sin is mortified, spiritual comfort cannot be any more than in proportion as sin is mortified.

3. A hope of eternal life, if given before the slaying of sin, would be misimproved and abused. If it were possible that a sinner could obtain a title to eternal life before sin was mortified, and so could have his own safety and God's favour manifested to him, he would only improve it to encourage and embolden himself in sin. Hope, if they had it then, would have a pernicious influence and tendency. Till sin is slain, they stand in need of fear to restrain

sin. If fear were once gone before sin is slain, they would soon run into all manner of wickedness, and without restraint. And so Christians themselves, while they are in corrupt frames, stand in need of fear to restrain sin; for at such times love is in a great degree dormant. It is of necessity that persons should have some principle or other to restrain them from sin. But there is no principle which can be effectual to restrain men from sin any farther than it is in exercise. If love is not in exercise it will not restrain men. So that at such times the saints need fear. And therefore God has wisely ordered it, that at such times their evidences should be darkened and their hopes clouded, that they may have fear, when love is not awake, to restrain them. The godly themselves, if their hope were all alive at those times when they are in carnal and thoughtless frames, and grace is asleep, would be in great danger to abuse their hope, and take encouragement from it to indulge their lusts, or at least, to be the less careful to restrain and resist them. For we see that in such frames, though their hopes are clouded, and they have a considerable degree of fear, yet they are careless and negligent. But how much more so would they be, if they had no fear to restrain them!

Application

I. Use of instruction.

1. Hence we may observe the wonderful wisdom of God in his dealings with the souls often. When we consider what has been said, with the reasons of it, we may see just cause to admire the divine wisdom in his ordinary dealings with respect to those for whom he intends comfort. His wisdom is admirable in his dealings with natural men in fitting and preparing them for comfort, in bringing them into such troubles and distress, and hedging up their way with thorns, as it is expressed in the context, and leaving them in their distress to follow after their lovers, their idols, without being able to overtake them; in taking away their vineyards, and all those things in which they trusted, and making them a forest; and so showing them what poor, destitute, helpless creatures they are, before he gives them comfort. And so we may well admire the divine wisdom in his method of dealing with his saints, who decline and fall into sin, or get into corrupt frames and ill ways. God knows how to order things concerning them; and there is a marvellous wisdom observable in his

manner of dealing with them in such cases. We may well admire how wisely God orders things in what has been said, for his own glory, to secure the glory due to his power and free grace, and to bring men to a sense of their dependence on him, and to ascribe all to him. And how he orders things for the glory of his Son, that he may have all the glory of the salvation of men, who is worthy of it, in that he laid down his life for their salvation. And also how wisely God orders things for the good of his own elect people, how he brings good out of evil, and light out of darkness. How wisely he consults their good and comfort in those things, which appear to them to be most against them. How he wisely prepares them for good, and makes way for their receiving comfort, and for its being the more sweet, the more prized and delighted in, when it is obtained. And oftentimes in bringing about this in those things, which they think at the time to be signs of God's hatred. And how wisely God orders things for preventing men's abusing a sense of their own safety, to giving the reins to their lusts. It is ordered so, that at those times when sin prevails, and there would be danger of this, the evidences of their safety are hid from their eyes, and the fear of hell comes on to keep them in awe; and that hope and comfort should be given only at such times and in such manner that they should have influence to draw men off from sin, and to prompt them to diligence in duty and the service of God; and that when it would have most of this tendency, then they should have most of it. When we consider these things, we may well cry out with the apostle, "O the depth both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!"

2. Hence we may learn, that souls, who are in darkness, and, as it were, in a wilderness, have no cause to be discouraged. For by the doctrine we learn that this is the way often, in order to hope and comfort. Persons are very often ready to be discouraged by this. God seems to frown. They have a sense of his anger. They cry to him, and he does not seem to hear their prayers. They have been striving for relief, but it seems to be to no purpose. They are in such circumstances, that everything looks dark; everything seems to be against them. They are lost in a wilderness; they cannot find the way out. They have gone round and round, and returned again to the same place. They know not which way to turn themselves, or what to do. Their hearts are ready to sink. But you may gather encouragement from this doctrine; for by it you may learn that you have no cause to despair. For it is frequently God's manner to bring persons into such circumstances, in order to prepare them for hope and

comfort. The children of Israel were ready to be discouraged at the Red sea, when they saw Pharaoh and his hosts pursuing them. But it was only to prepare them for the greater joy after their deliverance. Joshua and the hosts of Israel were ready to be discouraged when they were smitten at Ai, as you may see in Joshua vii. 5., &c. So that you, who are in the wilderness, may take encouragement from hence, still earnestly to seek God, and hope for light and comfort in his time.

II. Use of self-examination. By this persons may try their hopes and comforts, whether they are of the right kind. If they are such as have arisen after the manner, as is spoken of in the doctrine; if it is a hope which you found in the valley of Achor, in the sense which has been explained; it is a sign that it is a hope which God has given you, and so a hope which you are not to cast away; but which you are to retain, and rejoice in, and bless God for it. Therefore particularly inquire concerning your hopes and comforts, whether they have arisen in your souls when humbled for sin, and in the slaying of sin.

1. Inquire whether your hopes and comforts have been given you upon your soul's being humbled for sin. You may try this by three things.

1. Whether you have seen what a miserable, helpless creature you were. When your hopes and comforts have arisen in your heart, has it been upon your soul's receiving such a sight of yourself; or has your hope been accompanied with such a sense of soul? When hope was given at first, was it implanted in a heart thus prepared? And when you have had remarkable comfort and joy from time to time, has your joy been accompanied with such a sense and frame of mind? At the same time that you have had a strong hope of God's favour, and that Christ was yours, have you been nothing in your own eyes; have you at such times appeared to yourself to be a poor, little, helpless, unworthy creature, deserving nothing at the hands of God? And do not only inquire whether in your own apprehension you had some such sight of yourself at first, before your first comfort. If you ever had a right understanding of yourself, of your own heart, and your own state, you will never wholly lose it. It will revive from time to time. If you had it when you received your first comfort, the same sense will come again; when your comforts are revived, this will revive with them. If the first joy was granted to a heart thus prepared, there will from time to time be a sense of your own emptiness and worthlessness, arising with your joys and comforts. It will be with a deep sense of what a poor, miserable, and exceedingly sinful creature you are. True comfort

is wont to come in such a manner. There is usually a self-emptying, a soul-abasing, sense of heart accompanying it. So that at the same time that God lifts up the soul with comfort, and joy, and inward sweetness, he casts it down with abasement. Evangelical and gracious humiliation and spiritual comfort are companions, which go one with the other, and keep company together. When one comes, the other is wont to come with it. It is not wont to be so with false comforts and joys. But pride and self-fullness are wont to be the companions of false comfort. Indeed, there may be a counterfeit abasement going with it. But if you examine it, you will find, that that very seeming abasement or humiliation lifts the man up, and fills him full of himself. The hypocrite, in the times of his greatest joy, and most confident hopes, looks large in himself. His thoughts are very busily employed about his own excellencies, how holy he is, how eminent a saint he is, how much better he is than most of his neighbours, how there are few equal to him; and therefore how it must be that God loves him better than most others; how much God distinguishes him, how much he experiences, and how good he is, and what delight he takes in them on that account. But true spiritual comfort works in another way. Gracious joy and poverty of spirit go hand in hand, and rejoice, as it were, in each other's company. The godly may at some times have comforts and joys, which do not accompany such abasement. They may be lifted up with joy and conceit of, and confidence in, themselves at the same time. But those joys are not spiritual, they are hypocritical, joys. Such comforts are not from the Spirit of God. A godly man may have false joys. He is liable to this exercise of corruption, as well as others. And there may be a mixture of one with the other, or false joy and pride may take occasion from true ones, afterwards to appear. But a gracious joy is linked together with poverty of spirit, and never forsakes it. And hence,

2. You may try this by examining what your hopes and comforts are built upon; whether on Christ only, or on your own righteousness. If you would know of what kind your comforts are, follow them up to the fountain, and see what is their source and spring. If you would know of what kind your hope is, examine the bottom of it, and see upon what foundation it stands. If your hope is that which has been given in the valley of Achor, your own righteousness is not the foundation of it. Inquire therefore what it is, which gives you ease with respect to your past sins, what it is which quiets your conscience about them. Is it any sense you have of the free, and sovereign, and infinite grace and mercy of God in Christ? Is

it what you have seen in Christ, or the gospel of his grace, which has lightened your burden with respect to your sins? Or is it that now you think with yourself that you have done such and such things, or have met with such things, have such workings of affection towards God, that you are become lovely in his sight, so that he, seeing what holy affections and experiences your heart has been filled with, and what discoveries you have had, he is on that account reconciled to you, and you are become lovely in his eyes? What makes you hope that you are in favour with God? Is it because you conceive of God as looking down from heaven upon your heart, on your gracious experiences, and so being, as it were, taken with, and receiving you into his favour on account of that? Or is your hope of God's favour built on a sense which you have of Christ's worthiness, and the saving mercy of God in him, and his faithfulness to the promises, which he has made through him?

3. Inquire concerning the effect of your comforts, whether they cause an ardent disposition and desire to exalt God, and to lie low before him. True comforts and joys, which are from the Spirit of God, and are well founded, are wont to work after this manner. They excite an inward intense desire that God may be exalted, and to lie in the dust. Such a one as the psalmist seems to have had, when he says, Psal. cxv. 1. "Not unto us, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory." The repeating of the expression seems to show how ardent his heart was. When God is pleased to lift up the light of his countenance upon the soul, and to impart inward sweetness from a manifestation of his glory, there is wont to be an inward longing to be in the dust. At such times the Christian sees how it becomes him to be humble, and how worthy God and Christ are of all the glory, more than he does at other times. He perceives and laments that he cannot bow enough; that he is not abased as low before God as becomes such a sinner as himself. Hence arises an intense desire after self-abasement; and the soul breathes and pants after humiliation before God.

2. Inquire whether your hope and comfort are such as have arisen on the slaying of sin. If your hope is that which you obtained before this, you obtained it too soon, and had better be without it than with it. It is not sufficient evidence of your hope, that it was given after much trouble and great terrors, or great relenting of heart for sin, and bewailing that you had done so wickedly, or that it was after reformatations, and abstaining from former ways of sin, and a total reformation of some particular evil practices. But if it be a true hope, it was

given after the slaying of sin. And in order the better to determine this point, let the following inquiries be made.

1. Whether your hope has been accompanied with a heart and a life turned from sin? Or is there no remarkable difference in this respect now from what there was before? We all own conversion to be a great change; and we have all been sufficiently taught, that the change consists in this; in turning from sin to God. Therefore there must be a great change in this respect. Is there a great change in this respect in you? I do not inquire whether there be a great change in you in respect to hope and comfort; that whereas formerly you did not suppose yourself to be in Christ, and had no hope of it, now you have hope, and a confident hope, which oftentimes is an occasion of new and peculiar joy and elevation of spirit. There may be a great change in you in this respect, and yet you may remain in a Christless state. But is there a great change with respect to the turning of your heart from sin, and against sin? You may reply to this, "I see still abundance of corruption and wickedness in my heart; and so far is it from being delivered from corruption, that I seem at times to discover more than ever. But whether you see more or less corruption in your heart is your heart turned against that corruption which you see? Is there a great difference in you in this respect from what there used to be with respect to your being turned against your own sin, and finding within yourself a nature opposite to it, a nature to resist it, to carry it as an uneasy burden? And is your heart turned against yourself for it, in abhorrence of yourself, and in indignation against yourself? And is your will turned from sin, that though you find a great deal of corruption in your heart, yet you do not allow it, you keep a strict watch upon it, and will not let it walk at liberty to appear in your life and conversation? Is there no lust harboured, which is prevalent in you, and which is neglected, and suffered to range and to walk on every side? Is there no sin wittingly tolerated? Do you aim strictly to keep all God's commandments; and is that your actual care and watch, that you may avoid every evil, and every false way; and that you may in all things, so far as in you lies, please and honour God? And do you find that this is the tendency of your hope; that your hope has a sanctifying influence upon you, that it turns you against sin, and stirs you up to seek after purity from sin? With respect to most who are here present, who entertain hope, there has been much opportunity for experience in this matter, since you have had your hope, so that one would think by an impartial and strict examination you might be able to answer these inquiries.

2. Those of you, who have obtained your hope again after special and remarkable departing from God, should inquire in what manner hope has been restored. Indeed hypocrites are not so apt to have their hope abated by such things, as those who have a true hope. A hypocrite's hopes and false comforts will subsist, and it may be continue as lively as ever, under such great sins, and such a course of ill practices, as, if a godly man should fall into them, would bring him into exceeding darkness. Some hypocrites will live in very immoral ways, and yet keep up their confidence, seem not to have their hope much shaken, and boast of as much comfort and joy at such times as at any other. But this is not the manner of a true comfort. A true comfort, which flows from the exercise and the breathings of the Spirit of God in the heart, must, of necessity, at such times, be exceedingly suppressed; and commonly great trouble and darkness is the effect. But if it has not been altogether thus with you, but you have found that at times, when you have greatly sinned and gone on in ill practices, your hope has decayed, and in the time of it your conscience told you that the way in which you lived was contrary to known rules, and so was in doubt about your hope, but since that you have grown strong again in your hope, inquire in what manner you have obtained your hope again. Unsound professors in such cases are not wont to obtain hope again in the same manner as the truly godly do, in a deep humbling for sin, and in slaying the troubler, as has been described. But it may be only this, that now they do better than they did and so hope comes again. If they lived in a way of some vile sensuality for a time, and afterwards cease to do so, they look on their reformation as an atonement; and so their hope is renewed without any humbling or abasement, without any special convictions of the evil of their ways, any special repentance, or renewed sense of their own vile-ness, or any renewed flying to the mercy of God in Christ for refuge, or any further alienation of their hearts from those evil ways in which they have walked. If your comforts and confidence have been renewed after remarkable aberrations from the way of duty without something of this nature, it is to be feared that you make your own righteousness the ground of your hope and comfort.

3. Inquire whether at those times, when you have most hope and comfort, above all others, you are most disposed to be careful to avoid sin, and to strive to live holy. Sometimes the hope of hypocrites is very confident; and therefore the degree of confidence which attends a hope is no certain evidence of its truth and genuineness. But we should examine what

effect this strong confidence has upon us. Do we find, when our hope is strongest and our comfort greatest, that then our hearts are most set against sin, and that then we feel the greatest desires to live holy, and have most of a disposition to keep a strict watch, and maintain an earnest warfare against sin, and are most desirous in everything to do our duty? Or do we find, on the contrary, when our hope is strong, and we are most satisfied that our condition is safe, that then we are least careful to avoid sin, and are least disposed to take pains to curb our lusts, and resist temptation, or lay ourselves in the way of duty? If it be thus, it is a very bad sign, and a black mark on our hopes and comforts. A true hope has a tendency to prompt him who has it to purify himself, and watch and strive more earnestly against all impurity. 1 John iii. 3. "He that hath this hope in him purifieth himself." They are condemned who, because they think they are righteous, and so that they shall certainly have eternal life, will trust in that hope to give themselves the greater liberty in sin. Ezek. xxxiii. 13. "When I shall say to the righteous, that he shall surely live; if he trust to his own righteousness, and commit iniquity, all his righteousness shall not be remembered; but for his iniquity that he hath committed, he shall die."

III. Use of direction. If it be so, that God is wont to cause hope and comfort to arise after trouble and humbling for sin, and upon slaying the troubler, this may be of direction to souls under spiritual trouble and darkness, what course to pursue for hope and comfort.

1. Thoroughly to renounce and forsake all ways of sinful behaviour. For you have heard that hope and comfort are never to be expected, till sin is slain or forsaken. He who is not thorough in his reformation, cannot reasonably hope for comfort, how much soever he may abound in some particular duties. Persons who are under awakenings, and would seek a true hope of salvation, should in the first place see, that they thoroughly renounce every wicked practice. They should search their ways, and consider what is wrong in them: what duties they have omitted, which ought to have been done; and what practices they have allowed, which ought to be forsaken; and should immediately reform, retaining no one way of sin, denying all ungodliness, omitting nothing which is required; and should see that they persevere in it, that it be not merely a temporary, short-lived restraint, but an everlasting renunciation. This is the way to have the troubler slain.

2. Earnestly to seek humiliation. To that end they should labour to be convinced of sin. They should be much engaged in searching their own hearts, and keeping a watchful eye upon

them. They should not rest in their own efforts, but earnestly seek to God to give them a right sight of themselves, and a right conviction of sin, and show them that they have deserved God's everlasting wrath. And in order to this they should carefully watch against backsliding; for backsliding prevents humiliation. If there has been any progress made by the conviction of God's Spirit towards it, it is all lost by backsliding. This again blinds and stupefies the heart, and sets the man further than ever from a right knowledge of himself, and sight of his own heart.

3. To search and endeavour to find out the troubler. You have heard that when the godly are in darkness, it is not for want of love in God to them, or a readiness in him to give them comfort; but that sin is doubtless the cause of their darkness in one way or another. Their troubler lies at their own door. There is doubtless some troubler in the camp, which causes God to withdraw. And therefore if you would have light revive, and have the comfortable presence of God again, the first thing which you do must be to search, and find out the troubler. Many, when they are in darkness, proceed in a wrong way. They go to examining past experience. And that they should do; but what is wrong in it is, that they do that only. They spend their time in seeking for something in themselves which is good; whereas they ought to spend more of it in seeking out that which is bad. Whatever good there is, they are never likely to find it out, till they find out the sin which obscures and hides it. And whatever they reflect upon, which they formerly thought was good, is not likely to afford any satisfaction to them, till that bad thing be removed out of the way which troubled them. They wonder what the cause is, that they are so in the dark. They verily thought in time past, that they were right, and that they had experienced a right work of God's Spirit on their hearts, and thought that they were the children of God. But now God hides his face from them, and they wonder what is the matter; as Joshua seemed to be astonished when Israel was smitten down at Ai. Sometimes they almost conclude that it is because they are not the children of God. They pray to God to renew his comforts to them, and spend much "time. And they ought to pray. But they have more need to do something else. Joshua spent a great deal of time in prayer when Israel was troubled. He fell upon his face till eventide, complaining to God about his withdrawing from them. But God says to him, Josh. vii. 10, 11. "Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face?" As much as to say, you had more need to be doing something else, than lie there. "Israel hath sinned, and they have also

transgressed my covenant, which I commanded them; for they have even taken of the accursed thing." And ver. 13. "Up, sanctify yourselves." This teaches you, who are under darkness, and have your hopes darkened, and comforts deadened, what you should do. You must arise and search, and find out the troubler. If you do not do this, it will signify nothing to you to lie crying and complaining to God about your darkness. You have other business which you have more need to do, though prayer should not be left undone. Let me beseech you, therefore, to be thorough in this. You have need to be thorough, for it is an exceedingly difficult thing to find out the accursed thing in such cases. Men's hearts do like Achan, who hid the accursed thing in the earth in the midst of his tent. Joshua vii. 21. He hid it very closely. He did not content himself with hiding it in the most secret place in his tent, but he dug in the ground and buried it in the earth under his feet, that there might be no sign of it above ground. So are men's deceitful hearts wont to hide the accursed thing which troubles them. When they are put upon searching for the cause of their trouble and darkness, they think of one thing and another, but commonly overlook the chief cause of all their trouble. It does not so much as enter their minds. They search the tent, but that is not enough; they must search the very ground, or they will not find it out. When they tell of their darkness, and are put upon searching to see whether some sinful way is not the cause, they readily own that it is their fault. But yet they mistake the true Achan, notwithstanding all they confess of the corruption of their hearts. It is not merely corruption in their hearts, working in their thoughts, which is the cause; but it is some way of outward sin and wickedness, in which they have of late in a great measure allowed themselves. That is the principal cause of their trouble; some way of pride, or covetousness, or some way of envy, or evil-speaking, or ill will to their neighbours, or self-will, or some other way of unsuitable carriage, which is the chief cause of their darkness. In some respects, it is a great deal easier to find out little sins than greater sins, which causes many to strain at a gnat who swallow a camel. Sins which are common to all, and of which all complain, such as corrupt workings of heart, they are willing to feel that it is no disgrace to have them. And the godly commonly tell of such things, and it does not affright them to see them. But such things as malice, a proud behaviour, and many other things which might be mentioned, are disagreeable. They are not willing to see such things in themselves. They therefore call them by good names, and put good constructions on them, and hide them, as Achan did his accursed thing underground. The sin which troubles them most, has greatest possession of their hearts, and does

most blind and prejudices their minds, is passed over. They can soon enough discover and see such things in others, in one of an opposite party, or the like, but they cannot see them in themselves; and so they continue still under darkness. It is an exceedingly difficult thing to find out the troubler. You have need, therefore, to be exceedingly thorough in searching for this matter, and not to spare yourself, or bribe your conscience at all, but labour to be impartial in the search. And to induce you to this, consider what God said to Joshua. Josh. vii. 12. "Neither will I be with you any more, unless you destroy the accursed thing from among you." And, therefore,

4. When you have found out the troubler, be sure thoroughly to destroy it. Renounce it with detestation, as a vile serpent that has secretly lain under your head for a long time, and infected you with his poisons time after time, and bit you, when you were asleep, made you sick and filled you with pain, and you knew it not. Would not a man, when he has found out the serpent in such a case, destroy it with indignation, and be for ever afterwards thoroughly watchful that he is not caught with such a calamity again? You cannot be too thorough in destroying such an enemy, and labouring to root it out, and extirpate all its race. Whoever of you are under darkness and trouble, I am bold to say, if God help you to follow these directions, your darkness will soon be scattered, and hope and comfort will arise. And this is the surest, and readiest, and most direct course which any of you can take in order to the renewing of comfort in your soul. And without this, do not promise yourself any considerable degree of light or comfort while you live, however many examinations of past experiences and prayers to God for light you may make.