

God Attending to the Contrite in Spirit

By John Elias

“But to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.” - Isaiah 66:2

When a man whom we account great and wise bestows praise on anything, a desire arises in us to possess that thing for ourselves. If a dear friend of ours exhorts us to seek for something, we do all in our power to acquire it for his sake. In this text, there is a description of true religion. It has the approval and praise of God, who is infinitely wise. Everyone who is His friend longs to please Him by seeking it. The essence of that religion is a poor and contrite spirit.

Let us look first of all at the way the words are introduced. “Thus saith the Lord, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest? For all those things bath mine hand made, and all those things have been, saith the Lord” (Isa. 66:1-2). It is as if the Lord was saying, “You are thinking as men naturally think when you suppose that the temple you built is enough religion for you. What is the temple to Me? No temple can contain Me. The vast heaven is but a little stool for Me, and all the earth just a place on which to rest My feet. If I needed a temple, I could make My own in a minute by the word of My mouth: Or I could enlarge the face of the earth as a floor for My temple, and extend the heavens far wider than they are as a roof for it. I could set the sun, moon, and stars - the great lights of heaven - as lamps to illuminate it. But the truth is that the whole creation cannot contain Me. In a word, I could not make a temple that would contain Me. I set no value at all on temples that are the work of men's hands.”

Well, then, of what, Lord, dost thou take account? “To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit. True religion and those who practice it are a thousand times more valuable to Me than your precious temple.” One poor and contrite in spirit is of far greater worth in the sight of God than all the famous temples found on earth.

“To this man will I look.” Does the Lord say, “To these men”? No. Followers of this religion are so few and far between that it is impossible to refer to them as “these.” There are many in name but few in truth. I have to pass by many who

have a name for praying, praising, yes, and preaching too, before finding one like “this man.” This man is poor, contemptible, sad, and weak. He is like the man in the parable to whom the Pharisee referred scornfully as “this publican.” Others consider him not worthy of their attention; yet it is to this one that Jesus looks, and only to this one. He says, as it were, “All the mere followers and adherents of religion in the world mean nothing to Me, but 'this man' is precious to Me. I do not look on him along with others. I take no pleasure at all in any beside him. I will give them over to devils, and all the religious people in the world to hell fire, unless they are changed.”

Here is the only religion acceptable to God and which has any worth in His sight. The observations from these words I have in mind are as follows:

- I. Who are the poor and contrite in spirit?
- II. A contrite spirit and a broken heart are precious to God
- III. Why, based on reason and Scripture, they are precious to Him
- IV. Counsel as to obtaining a contrite spirit

I. Who are the poor and contrite in spirit?

What are we to understand by this description? Who is the “poor” man? He is one who has been broken, crushed, bruised, and wounded; one who has been pricked in his heart at the sight of his sins and an awareness of them, and at the sight of Christ suffering for them; one who has been trampled under the hooves of the law and felt the benefit of the gospel; one who feels, in a manner of speaking, that there is no health nor soundness in him.

II. The great value of a contrite and broken spirit in the sight of God

God praises this kind of religion, and it is important to possess a religion that is homered by God. “Circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God” (Rom. 2:29). Again, in 2 Corinthians 10:18, Paul says, “For not he that commendeth himself is approved, but whom the Lord commendeth.” These are the ones that God praises in His

Word more than any other, the poor and contrite in spirit. I intend to prove to you from reason and Scripture that the contrite spirit and the broken heart are pleasing and of great worth to God.

These are the sacrifices of God. "For thou desirest not sacrifice" (that is, of animals) "else would I give it: thou delightest not in burnt offering." But, "the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Ps. 51:16-17). Notice the form of the words: it is not the sacrifice, but the sacrifices of God that are spoken about. This is a reference to all the performances of the professors of religion to show that neither preaching, praying, hearing, singing, nor any of your works or religious deeds are acceptable sacrifices to God without a broken heart and a contrite spirit. Indeed, your worship and endless round of religious duties are abhorrent to Him apart from this. Without this spirit your singing, hearing, and praying are but a stench in the nostrils of the Lord of hosts. Apart from this, all our preaching will be rejected, and your hearing unacceptable. Everything we do is unacceptable and fails to meet with God's approval unless accompanied by a broken spirit. This is essential to all our offerings.

Here I draw attention to three matters:

1. The Lord prefers this to all the expensive sacrifices men with whole hearts can bring to Him. These sacrifices are of more worth to God than all the valuable offerings of old. We see this from Psalm 51 and elsewhere—"Thou desirest not sacrifice... thou delightest not in burnt offering." What does He desire? "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit." The sacrifices of a broken heart are approved by God more than all the most costly sacrifices that ever were offered.

2. The breaking of the heart and the submission of the poor mean far more to God than the apparent, superficial submission of all the carnal professors of religion in the world. Mere outward display, such as wearing sackcloth, bowing the head, or rending the garment and the like are utterly worthless in God's account without inward repentance. Make yourselves presentable within through humility, and "rend your heart, and not your garments" (Joel 2:13). It is as if God was saying, "I would rather see one broken heart before Me than all the rent garments, and sackcloth and ashes."

3. The Lord prefers this sacrifice or attitude to all the detailed service of a formal pharisaical religion. Think of the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. Looking at these two, and judging by the outer appearance, almost everyone would say that the Pharisee was the more virtuous and the more gifted in prayer. Yet it was the poor, afflicted, contrite publican who went home justified, and not the other.

Another reason which shows that a broken heart is precious in God's sight is that this spirit is one of the invaluable features included in his promise. In Jeremiah 31:33, Ezekiel 11:19 and 36:26 we read that God will take away the stony heart and give His people a heart of flesh, that He will write His laws in their hearts and in their minds, and that they would be to Him a people and He would be a God to them.

Furthermore, the broken-hearted man is bound to be of great worth to God for God Himself has promised to be a physician to him. Psalm 147:3 reads, "He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds." Who is the one who does this? The Lord is the one. Your Physician is quite insignificant, is He not? By no means. He is the one who counts the stars, calling them all by their names. He is the one who covers the heavens with clouds and holds the sea in His palm. Our Physician is mighty - the Lord whose power is immense and whose understanding is past telling. Who heals the broken in heart and binds his wounds? None other than he. Is it some famous servant? No; no less a person than the Physician himself! Just as a skilled and famous doctor whose close friend is ill, and under his care will not entrust him to the care of an assistant or apprentice but will attend to him himself, so it is with the Physician of sinners. He will not send angels or saints to this task. He trusts no one with the work of saving the broken in heart because they are His loved one's. Perhaps some servant may be allowed to carry a bottle from Him to them, but no one other than He may administer the medicine.

Also, it is certain that such people are precious to God because He has promised to dwell with them. The psalmist says, "Though the Lord be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly" (Ps. 138:6). Isaiah 57:15 says that although God dwells in the high and holy place, He dwells also with him that is of a contrite and humble spirit. High enough or low enough, God chooses to be there, either in the height and in glory or in the humble cottage of the poor in spirit. The Lord will not have somewhere in between; He must have exclusive possession of the rooms of the

heart or nothing. God will not cohabit with the devil, and there is no communion between Him and Belial. He will not dwell with false professors, nor with the false presumptuous serpents who are nothing but religious hypocrites. God does not make a home for Himself with the arrogant and proud-He knows the proud afar off - but with the lowly and afflicted in spirit. He has desired these for His dwelling. "To this man will I look." This is the man I will observe; in him I will delight, of him I will take account, to him will I turn My face, and on him will I bestow approval.

Let us look at three thoughts concerning the words, "this man":

1. This is the man I will observe. My eye will follow him everywhere and I will watch over him whenever his spirit is troubled. When he groans in the depths, and sighs in the prisons; when his sins have overpowered him; when he is surrounded by his enemies so that he cannot draw breath - then will I attend closely to him and will defend him.
2. This is the man in whom I will delight. I love no one more than I love him. No professor of religion pleases Me except this one. I love to hear the sound of his knocking and of his voice crying at My throne.
3. This is the man of whom I will take account. There are on the vine many leaves that are blown into the ditch, and many branches that bear no fruit that are thrown away to be burnt. But this man is the substance of the vine. Those like him are My true church, and them I will make My possession.
4. This is the man on whom I will bestow approval. I will be careful to acknowledge him. I will commend him, I will choose him, and I will make it plain to others that I love him. I will show Myself to him, I will cause My face to shine on him, I will comfort him when he is troubled, I will be his God and he will be My peculiar possession. To this man will I look, to defend him in every kind of weather that he will encounter on his journey. I will keep My eye on him in the river of death; I will be with him in and through the deep waters, and I will bring him safely home.

III. Why the poor and afflicted are so beloved of God

There are four reasons for this:

1. Because they give their hearts to God and it is for the heart that God asks
2. Because they are without guile; God holds dear those whose religion is without deceit
3. Because their affliction springs chiefly from a sight of Christ crucified
4. Because they are humble, and it is the humble professors of religion that God loves

1. God longs for the heart, and He loves these because He has their whole heart. In Proverbs 23:26, we hear the voice of God saying,

“My son, give me thine heart.” This is the language of God for all who are here today. Oh, great and glorious multitude, will you give your hearts to God? God has come without question to our meeting according to His promise, although He is not so evidently in our midst as on previous occasions. Yet He is here, even if it is at the borders. We have not been left entirely without a sense of His presence throughout the meeting. But this is what I have to say: Do you know why He has come? What is His errand? He has come to seek for your heart and mine. Now, let me be so bold as to ask you: Has His errand been a success? I ask each one of you individually: has His errand been successful in your case? I imagine someone ready to say, “My heart is not worth giving; it is desperately wicked. You do not know it. It is harder than adamant and its misery is from hell.” He does not ask what your heart is like-He simply says, “Give it to Me” as it is. Give it to Me without delay; give it to Me without waiting to make it better. The Lord says through the prophet, “Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me” (Isa. 29:13). I say with great earnestness, Oh, Lord! What dost Thou have against my dear listeners? Lord, they have been here from morning until evening. They arose at daybreak to hear the Word of life, and have continued until nightfall. Dear Lord, what dost Thou have against them? “Their hearts are far from Me.” We can see no fault in them - their demeanour is sober, they listen intently, their generosity to your cause and their tenderness are beyond expectation. “But, in spite of it all, they have never given their hearts to Me.” Again, the Lord says through the prophet Ezekiel, “And they come unto thee as the people cometh,

and they sit before thee as my people, and they hear thy words... but their heart goeth after their covetousness" (Ez. 33:31). My people, God requires the heart!

2. These are pleasing to God because they are without guile. None are more genuine and sincere than those who are poor in spirit, and a religion without pretence is of the utmost importance to God. He loves truth within, and takes pleasure in purity in His children. It is truthfulness in the heart and uprightness in principle that He requires. These are those of whom it can be said, "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" (John 1:47). This is why He loves them. If only I could express what is on my mind just now. These people, poor and afflicted in spirit, have been dealt with in such manner that there is no way for them to entertain deceit or for falsehood to remain in them. The lightning of Sinai has struck them-the arrows of the Word have wounded them-and every joint pierced by the sharp, two-edged sword. The weapons of God have crushed them and the hammer of divine truth in the hand of the Spirit of God has beaten every inch of them, so that it is impossible for them to contain deceit, hypocrisy, or anything of the kind.

3. God loves the contrite in spirit because their affliction springs chiefly from a sight of Christ crucified. Their grief is intense from looking at their sins, but as they look further, on Him whom they pierced, their grief is doubled. Great is their concern for the afflictions of Joseph. Their sorrow was very deep on the slopes of Sinai. But at Calvary it reached its peak as they beheld Christ crucified and bruised for their iniquities. And God loves those who love His Son; He comforts those who mourn for wounding Him.

4. He loves them because they are humble and self-effacing; this attitude is highly prized by God and is most seemly.

IV. Some directions as to how this spirit may be obtained

I imagine I can see a great company beside themselves with a longing and desire to possess this spirit, and ready to cry out with one voice, Oh Lord, what shall we do in order to have this spirit? Is there any way in which I can make it mine? If there is anyone like this present, thank God I have authority to answer: Yes, there is a way, and it is for such as you. To the hard-hearted, the promise is for a tender

heart; therefore, I counsel you to seek it; and in order that your search may be successful, let me give you three exhortations: First, seek it from God. He delights to see such as you at His throne, and it will please Him to hear you asking for a broken heart. Second, seek it through Christ. This is where He has promised to meet in peace with the sinner, and through Christ, every helpless cry is acceptable. Third, seek it by pleading His promise to take away the stony heart and to replace it with an heart of flesh. Seek it in this way, and you will certainly receive it; He has never refused anyone who has sought it according to the manner He has decreed.

Here are some applications of these things, and some general observations arising from them.

1. Set your sight on the blood of the cross. Look from where you are to Jesus suffering in your place. See the rough treatment He received from the court of Pilate to the hill of Calvary. Hear His groanings in the garden. Consider the bitterness of His suffering and the intensity of His crying in the agonies of the death of the cross.
2. Be mindful of your many faults and your sins in the face of conscience and light, and your lies ever since you were a child. Look back a little on your life, and perhaps you will remember one out of a thousand, and of your idle words one out of ten thousand, and of your wicked works, one out of a million. But know this, although you may have forgotten them, God does not forget. They are in the book of His remembrance. He beholds the good and the bad, in the darkness as in the light: Consider the number of your sins without repentance, and be amazed that you are not in hell.
3. Think hard about the wages of sin, and the wrath of God revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.
4. Consider the judgment to come and the minute account you have to give if you go there without being changed.
5. Look to eternity and to the fact that you will be there in one of two conditions; and ask yourself in all seriousness, "What? Shall I go there without faith in Christ?"

6. Observe the ordinances and frequent the means of grace. Choose and love the ministry that will shake your bad foundations, and the most fervent sermons, and the most sincere and pointed preachers.

7. Pray often, pray often in secret and say, "Lord, break my heart with Thy tenderness; wound my heart a little again in this service." Cry to Him again and again to give you that religion that is acceptable to Him. And do not give in until you prosper in your errand.

One or two words again to two kinds of people before I finish: to those whose hearts are whole and to those whose hearts are afflicted. First, to those whose hearts are whole: what hard people you are! Your hearts are sound and your spirits are whole and you have not been humbled by grace. God's weapons have never affected you at all. You who have been able to remain complete, in spite of all means employed by God and all His dealings with you. You who do not fear and are not pricked under the fiery ministry of Sinai, nor the threatening of the Almighty against sin. You whose hearts are not melted by the gracious proclamation of the gentle gospel and the infinite grace of Jehovah. Heed the warning in time. If you go on like this much longer, the effect of the wrath of God on you will be so dreadful that there will be no means of recovery. Then you will remember when it is too late, how many times Christ and His salvation were offered to you. But you took no account and did not profit in the least from His sacrifice. Rather, you refused the Physician who saves to the uttermost, and the Brother born for adversity. Oh pray, while God hears prayer, that He will break your heart by His grace, so that He will not have to break it by His indignation!

Next, to those whose hearts are broken, and to the afflicted in spirit. I love to speak of this. Oh blessed people, God loves to gaze upon you! But you say, "What, me? You have missed the mark entirely. Me, blessed? There is not a man in the congregation with a harder heart than mine, or one more miserable in his feelings. Indeed, the hardness of my heart is my grief, and the health of my spirit is my concern every day!" Well, poor soul, do you not recognize your character yet? If this is how you feel, I am bold to say that you are the very person. You are the one in whom God delights, the very one who knows each plague of his own heart. And I have news to give you today. God has promised to restore you, and make you perfectly whole, and cleanse you from your plague forever.

Oh, that we would have more brokenness among us! How many there are whose hearts are still whole, in spite of all God's dealings! Where are the divine weapons, and the sharp arrows, and the dear hammer that breaks the rocks of flint? Where is the sharp, two-edged sword that separates the soul and the spirit, the joints and the marrow, and divides men from their sins? Oh God! Come with Thy weapons. Work graciously on souls. Show Thyself mighty through the ministry. Manifest Thyself in our midst. Break hearts with Thy love. Shatter with Thy grace many whole, hard, stubborn, wicked hearts. Work until the hardest are overcome. May it be so. Amen.