

The Worst Things

by Thomas Watson

The worst things can work for good because God, in His wisdom and sovereignty, can use them to sanctify and refine us, making us more like Christ and preparing us for glory.

Scripture: Psalm 51:8, Psalm 56:8, Psalm 119:71, Romans 8:25, Romans 8:28, 1 Corinthians 11:31, 2 Corinthians 12:7, Galatians 5:17

Topics: "Suffering And Faith", "Gods Sovereignty"

Description

Thomas Watson preaches about how the worst things, such as afflictions, temptations, desertions, and sins, can be overruled by God for the good of His people. He explains how afflictions work for good by teaching valuable lessons, refining character, and drawing believers closer to God. Similarly, temptations are turned into opportunities for prayer, self-examination, and reliance on Christ's strength. Desertions lead to a deeper appreciation of God's presence and a longing for heaven. Even the sense of sinfulness in the godly serves to humble, purify, and drive believers to seek God more fervently.

Transcript

The Worst Things

An excerpt from Thomas Watson's "A Divine Cordial" 1663

"And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." Romans 8:28

We shall consider, first--WHAT things work for good to the godly; and here we shall show that both the best things and the worst things work for their good.

Do not mistake me, I do not say that of their own nature, the worst things are good, for they are a fruit of the curse. But though they are naturally evil--yet the wise overruling hand of God disposing and sanctifying them--they are morally good. As the elements, though of contrary qualities--yet God has so tempered them, that they all work in a harmonious manner for the good of the universe. Or as in a watch, the wheels seem to move contrary one to another--but all carry on the motions of the watch. Just so, things that seem to move cross to the godly--yet by the wonderful providence of God, work for their good. Among these worst things, there are four sad evils which work for good to those who love God.

1. The evil of AFFLICTION works for good, to the godly.

It is one heart-quieting consideration in all the afflictions which befall us--that God has a special hand in them: "The Almighty has afflicted me" (Ruth 1:21). Instruments can no more stir until God gives them a commission, than the axe can cut, by itself, without a hand. Job eyed God in his affliction: therefore, as Augustine observes, he does not say, "The Lord gave--and the devil took away," but, "The Lord has taken away." Whoever brings an affliction to us, it is God who sends it.

Another heart quieting consideration is--that afflictions work for good. "I have sent them into captivity for their own good." (Jer. 24:6). Judah's captivity in Babylon was for their good. "It is good for me that I have been afflicted" (Psalm 119:71). This text, like Moses' tree cast into the bitter waters of affliction, may make them sweet and wholesome to drink. Afflictions to the godly are medicinal. Out of the most poisonous drugs God extracts our salvation. Afflictions are as needful as ordinances (1 Peter 1:6). No vessel can be made of gold without fire; so it is impossible that we should be made vessels of honor, unless we are melted and refined in the furnace of affliction. "All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth" (Psalm 35:10). As the painter intermixes bright colors with dark shadows; so the wise God mixes mercy with judgment. Those afflictive providences which seem to be harmful, are beneficial. Let us take some instances in Scripture.

Joseph's brethren throw him into a pit; afterwards they sell him; then he is cast into prison; yet all this did work for his good. His abasement made way for his advancement, he was made the second man in the kingdom. "You thought evil against me--but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20).

Jacob wrestled with the angel, and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was put out of joint. This was sad; but God turned it to good, for there he saw God's face, and there the Lord blessed him. "Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, for I have seen God face to face" (Gen. 32:30). Who would not be willing to have a bone out of joint, so that he might have a sight of God?

King Manasseh was bound in chains. This was sad to see--a crown of gold changed into fetters. But it wrought for his good, for, "So the Lord sent the Assyrian armies, and they took Manasseh prisoner. They put a ring through his nose, bound him in bronze chains, and led him away to Babylon. But while in deep distress, Manasseh sought the Lord his God and cried out humbly to the God of his ancestors. And when he prayed, the Lord listened to him and was moved by his request for help." (2 Chron. 33:11-13). He was more indebted to his iron chain--than to his golden crown. The one made him proud--the other made him humble.

Job was a spectacle of misery; he lost all that he ever had; he abounded only in boils and ulcers. This was sad; but it wrought for his good, his grace was proved and improved. God gave a testimony from heaven of his integrity, and did compensate his loss by giving him twice as much as ever he had before (Job 13:10).

Paul was smitten with blindness. This was uncomfortable--but it turned to his good. God did by that blindness, make way for the light of grace to shine into his soul; it was the beginning of a happy conversion (Acts 9:6).

As the hard frosts in winter bring on the flowers in the spring; as the night ushers in the morning star: so the evils of affliction produce much good to those who love God. But we are ready to question the truth of this, and say, as Mary did to the angel, "How can this be?" Therefore I shall show you several ways how affliction works for good.

(1). Affliction works for good--as it is our preacher and teacher--"Hear the rod" (Micah 6:9). Luther said that he could never rightly understand some of the Psalms--until he was in affliction.

Affliction teaches what sin is. In the word preached, we hear what a dreadful thing sin is, that it is both defiling and damning--but we fear it no more than a painted lion; therefore God lets loose affliction--and then we feel sin bitter in the fruit of it. A sick bed often teaches more than a sermon. We can best see the ugly visage of sin in the looking-glass of affliction!

Affliction teaches us to know ourselves. In prosperity we are for the most part strangers to ourselves. God afflicts us--that we may better know ourselves. We see that corruption in our hearts, in the time of affliction, which we would not believe was there. Water in the glass looks clear--but set it on the fire, and the scum boils up. In prosperity, a man seems to be humble and thankful, the water looks clear; but set this man a little on the fire of affliction, and the scum boils up--much impatience and unbelief appear. "Oh," says a Christian, "I never thought I had such a bad heart, as now I see I have! I never thought my corruptions had been so strong, and my graces so weak."

(2). Afflictions work for good--as they are the means of making the heart more upright. In prosperity the heart is apt to be divided (Hos. 10:2). The heart cleaves partly to God--and partly to the world. It is like a needle between two loadstones: God draws, and the world draws. Now God takes away the world--that the heart may cleave more to Him in sincerity. Correction is a setting the heart right and straight. As we sometimes hold a crooked rod over the fire to straighten it; so God holds us over the fire of affliction to make us more straight and upright. Oh, how good it is, when sin has bent the soul awry from God, that affliction should straighten it again!

(3). Afflictions work for good--as they conform us to Christ. God's rod is a pencil to draw Christ's image more lively upon us. It is good that there should be symmetry and proportion between the Head and the members. Would we be parts of Christ's mystical body, and not like Him? His life, as Calvin says, was a series of sufferings, "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). He wept, and bled. Was His head crowned with thorns, and do we think to be crowned with roses? It is good to be like Christ, though it be by sufferings. Jesus Christ drank a bitter cup, it made Him sweat drops of blood to think of it; and, though He drank the poison in the cup (the wrath of God) yet there is some wormwood in the cup left, which the saints must drink: only here is the difference between Christ's sufferings and ours; His were atoning, ours are only chastening.

(4). Afflictions work for good to the godly, as they are destructive to sin. Sin is the mother, affliction is the daughter; the daughter helps to destroy the mother. Sin is like the tree which breeds the worm, and affliction is like the worm that eats the tree. There is much corruption in the best heart: affliction does by degrees work it out, as the fire works out the dross from the gold, "The Lord did this to purge away his sin" (Isaiah 37:9). What if we have more of the rough file--if we have less rust! Afflictions carry away nothing but the dross of sin. If a physician should say to a patient, "Your body is distempered, and full of bad humours, which must be cleared out, or you will die. But I will prescribe physic which, though it may make you sick--yet it will carry away the dregs of your disease, and save your life." Would not this be for the good of the patient? Afflictions are the medicine which God uses to carry off our spiritual diseases; they cure the swelling of pride, the fever of lust, the cancer of covetousness. Do they not then work for good?

(5). Afflictions work for good--as they are the means of loosening our hearts from the world. When you dig away the earth from the root of a tree, it is to loosen the tree from the earth. Just so, God digs away our

earthly comforts to loosen our hearts from the earth. A thorn grows up with every flower. God would have the world hang as a loose tooth which, being twitched away does not much trouble us. Is it not good to be weaned? The oldest saints need it. Why does the Lord break the conduit pipe--but that we may go to Him, in whom are "all our fresh springs" (Psalm 87:7).

(6). Afflictions work for good--as they make way for comfort. "In the valley of Achor, is a door of hope" (Hos. 2:15) Achor signifies trouble. God sweetens outward pain with inward peace. "Your sorrow shall be turned into joy" (John 16:20). Here is the water turned into wine. After a bitter pill, God gives sugar. Paul had his prison songs. God's rod has honey at the end of it. The saints in affliction have had such sweet raptures of joy, that they thought themselves in the borders of the heavenly Canaan.

(7). Afflictions work for good--as they are a magnifying of us. "What is man, that you should magnify him, and that you should visit him every morning?" (Job 7:17). God does by affliction magnify us three ways.

(1st.) In that He will condescend so low as to take notice of us. It is an honor that God will mind dust and ashes. It is a magnifying of us, that God thinks us worthy to be smitten. God's not striking is a slighting: "Why should you be stricken any more?" (Isaiah 1:5). If you will go on in sin, take your course--sin yourselves into hell.

(2nd.) Afflictions also magnify us, as they are ensigns of glory, signs of sonship. "If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons" (Heb. 12:7). Every print of the rod, is a badge of honor.

(3rd.) Afflictions tend to the magnifying of the saints, as they make them renowned in the world. Soldiers have never been so admired for their victories, as the saints have been for their sufferings. The zeal and constancy of the martyrs in their trials have rendered them famous to posterity. How eminent was Job for his patience! God leaves his name upon record: "You have heard of the patience of Job" (James 5:11). Job the sufferer, was more renowned than Alexander the conqueror.

(8.) Afflictions work for good--as they are the means of making us happy. "Happy is the man whom God corrects" (Job 5:17). What politician or moralist ever placed happiness in afflictions? Job does. "Happy is the man whom God corrects."

It may be said, How do afflictions make us happy? We reply that, being sanctified, they bring us nearer to God. The moon in the full is furthest off from the sun: so are many further off from God in the full moon of prosperity; afflictions bring them nearer to God. The magnet of mercy does not draw us so near to God as the cords of affliction. When Absalom set Joab's corn on fire, then he came running to Absalom (2 Sam. 16:30). When God sets our worldly comforts on fire, then we run to Him, and make our peace with Him. When the prodigal was pinched with need, then he returned home to his father (Luke 15:13). When the dove could not find any rest for the sole of her foot, then she flew to the ark. When God brings a deluge of affliction upon us, then we fly to the ark, Christ. Thus affliction makes us happy, in bringing us nearer to God. Faith can make use of the waters of affliction, to swim faster to Christ.

(9). Afflictions work for good--as they put to silence the wicked. How ready are they to asperse and calumniate the godly, that they serve God only for self-interest. Therefore God will have His people endure sufferings for religion, that He may put a padlock on the lying lips of wicked men. When the atheists of the world see that God has a people, who serve Him not for a livery--but for love, this stops their mouths. The devil accused Job of hypocrisy, that he was a mercenary man, all his religion was made up of ends of gold and silver. "Does Job serve God for naught? Have not you made a hedge about him?" Etc. "Well," says

God, "put forth your hand, touch his estate" (Job 1:9). The devil had no sooner received a commission--but he falls a breaking down Job's hedge; but still Job worships God (Job 1:20), and professes his faith in Him. "Though he slays me--yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15). This silenced the devil himself. How it strikes a damp into wicked men, when they see that the godly will keep close to God in a suffering condition, and that, when they lose all, they yet will hold fast their integrity.

(10). Afflictions work for good--as they make way for glory (2 Cor. 4:17). Not that they merit glory--but they prepare for it. As ploughing prepares the earth for a crop, so afflictions prepare and make us fit for glory. The painter lays his gold upon dark colors--so God first lays the dark colors of affliction, and then He lays the golden color of glory. The vessel is first seasoned before wine is poured into it: the vessels of mercy are first seasoned with affliction, and then the wine of glory is poured in. Thus we see afflictions are not harmful--but beneficial, to the saints. We should not so much look at the evil of affliction, as the good; not so much at the dark side of the cloud, as the light. The worst that God does to His children, is to whip them to heaven!

2. The evil of TEMPTATION is overruled for good to the godly.

The evil of temptation works for good. Satan is called the tempter (Mark 4:15). He is ever lying in ambush, he is continually at work with one saint or another. The devil has his circuit that he walks every day: he is not yet fully cast into prison--but, like a prisoner that goes under bail, he walks about to tempt the saints. This is a great molestation to a child of God. Now concerning Satan's temptations; there are three things to be considered:

(1). His method in tempting.

(2). The extent of his power.

(3). These temptations are overruled for good.

(1). Satan's METHOD in tempting. Here take notice of two things. His violence in tempting; and so he is the red dragon. He labors to storm the castle of the heart, he throws in thoughts of blasphemy, he tempts to deny God. These are the fiery darts which he shoots, by which he would inflame the passions. Also, notice his subtlety in tempting; and so he is the old serpent. There are five chief subtleties the devil uses.

(1.) He observes the temperament and constitution--he lays suitable baits of temptation. Like the farmer, he knows what grain is best for the soil. Satan will not tempt contrary to the natural disposition and temperament. This is his policy--he makes the wind and tide go together; that way the natural tide of the heart runs, that way the wind of temptation blows. Though the devil cannot know men's thoughts--yet he knows their temperament, and accordingly he lays his baits. He tempts the ambitious man with a crown, the lustful man with beauty.

(2.) Satan observes the fittest time to tempt--as a cunning angler casts in his angle when the fish will bite best. Satan's time of tempting is usually after an ordinance--and the reason is, he thinks he shall find us most secure. When we have been at solemn duties, we are apt to think all is done, and we grow remiss, and leave off that zeal and strictness as before; just as a soldier, who after a battle leaves off his armor, not once dreaming of an enemy. Satan watches his time, and, when we least suspect, then he throws in a temptation.

(3.) He makes use of near relations; the devil tempts by a proxy. Thus he handed over a temptation to Job by his wife. "Are you still trying to maintain your integrity? Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9). A wife in the bosom may be the devil's instrument to tempt to sin.

(4.) Satan tempts to evil by those who are good; thus he gives poison in a golden cup. He tempted Christ by Peter. Peter dissuades him from suffering. "Master, pity Yourself!" Who would have thought to have found the tempter in the mouth of an apostle?

(5.) Satan tempts to sin under a pretense of religion. He is most to be feared when he transforms himself into an angel of light. He came to Christ with Scripture in his mouth: "It is written." The devil baits his hook with religion. He tempts many a man to covetousness and extortion under a pretense of providing for his family; he tempts some to do away with themselves, that they may live no longer to sin against God; and so he draws them into sin, under a pretense of avoiding sin. These are his subtle stratagems in tempting.

(2). The extent of his POWER; how far Satan's power in tempting reaches.

(1.) He can propose the object; as he set a wedge of gold before Achan.

(2.) He can poison the imagination, and instill evil thoughts into the mind. As the Holy Spirit casts in good suggestions, so the devil casts in bad ones. He put it into Judas' heart to betray Christ (John 13:2).

(3.) Satan can excite and irritate the corruption within, and work some kind of inclinableness in the heart to embrace a temptation. Though it is true Satan cannot force the will to yield consent--yet he being a cunning suitor, by his continual solicitation, may provoke to evil. Thus he provoked David to number the people (1 Chron. 21:1). The devil may, by his subtle arguments, dispute us into sin.

(3). These temptations are overruled for good to the children of God. A tree that is shaken by the wind is more settled and rooted. Just so, the blowing of a temptation does but settle a Christian the more in grace. Temptations are overruled for good in eight ways:

(1.) Temptation sends the soul to prayer. The more furiously Satan tempts, the more fervently the saint prays. The deer being shot with the dart, runs faster to the water. When Satan shoots his fiery darts at the soul, it then runs faster to the throne of grace. When Paul had the messenger of Satan to buffet him, he says, "For this I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me" (2 Cor. 12:8). Temptation is a medicine for carnal security. That which makes us pray more, works for good.

(2.) Temptation to sin, is a means to keep from the perpetration of sin. The more a child of God is tempted, the more he fights against the temptation. The more Satan tempts to blasphemy, the more a saint trembles at such thoughts, and says, "Get you hence, Satan." When Joseph's mistress tempted him to folly, the stronger her temptation was, the stronger was his opposition. That temptation which the devil uses as a spur to sin, God makes a bridle to keep back a Christian from it.

(3.) Temptation works for good--as it abates the swelling of pride. "Lest I should be exalted above measure, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me" (2 Cor. 12:7). The thorn in the flesh was to puncture the puffing up of pride. Better is that temptation which humbles me--than that duty which makes me proud. Rather than a Christian shall be haughty minded, God will let him fall into the devil's hands awhile, to be cured of his swelling pride.

(4.) Temptation works for good--as it is a touchstone to try what is in the heart. The devil tempts, that he may deceive; but God allows us to be tempted, to try us. Temptation is a trial of our sincerity. It argues that our heart is chaste and loyal to Christ, when we can look a temptation in the face, and turn our back upon it. Also it is a trial of our courage. "Ephraim is a silly dove, without heart" (Hosea 8:11). So it may be said of many, they are without a heart; they have no heart to resist temptation. No sooner does Satan come with his bait--but they yield; like a coward who, as soon as the thief approaches, gives him his purse. But he is the valorous Christian, who brandishes the sword of the Spirit against Satan, and will rather die than yield. The courage of the Romans was never more seen than when they were assaulted by the Carthaginians: the valor and courage of a saint is never more seen than on a battlefield, when he is fighting the red dragon, and by the power of faith puts the devil to flight. That grace is tried gold, which can stand in the fiery trial, and withstand Satan's fiery darts!

(5.) Temptations work for good--as God makes those who are tempted, fit to comfort others in the same distress. A Christian must himself be under the buffetings of Satan, before he can speak a word in due season to him that is weary. Paul was well-versed in temptations. "We are not ignorant of his devices" (2 Cor. 2:11). Thus he was able to acquaint others with Satan's cursed wiles (1 Cor. 10:13). A man that has ridden over a place where there are bogs and quicksands, is the fittest to guide others through that dangerous way. He who has felt the claws of the roaring lion, and has lain bleeding under those wounds, is the fittest man to deal with one who is tempted. None can better discover Satan's subtle devices, than those who have been long in the fencing school of temptation.

(6.) Temptations work for good--as they stir up fatherly compassion in God, to those who are tempted. The child who is sick and bruised is most looked after. When a saint lies under the bruising of temptations, Christ prays, and God the Father pities. When Satan puts the soul into a fever, God comes with a cordial; which made Luther say, that temptations are Christ's embraces, because He then most sweetly manifests Himself to the soul.

(7.) Temptations work for good--as they make the saints long more for heaven. There they shall be out of gunshot; heaven is a place of rest, no bullets of temptation fly there. The eagle which soars aloft in the air, and sits upon high trees--is not troubled with the stinging of the serpent. Just so, when believers are ascended to heaven, they shall not be molested by the old serpent, the devil. In this life, when one temptation is over, another comes. This makes God's people wish for death--to call them off the battlefield where the bullets fly so quick--and to receive a victorious crown, where neither the drum nor cannon--but the harp and violin, shall be eternally sounding.

(8.) Temptations work for good--as they engage the strength of Christ. Christ is our Friend, and when we are tempted, He sets all His power working for us. "Since he himself has gone through suffering and temptation, he is able to help us when we are being tempted" (Heb. 2:18). If a poor soul was to fight alone with the Goliath of hell, he would be sure to be vanquished--but Jesus Christ brings in His auxiliary forces, He gives fresh supplies of grace. "We are more than conquerors through him who loved us!" (Romans 8:37). Thus the evil of temptation is overruled for good.

Question. But sometimes Satan foils a child of God. How does this work for good?

Answer. I grant that, through the suspension of divine grace, and the fury of a temptation, a saint may be overcome; yet this foiling by a temptation shall be overruled for good. By this foil God makes way for the augmentation of grace. Peter was tempted to self-confidence, he presumed upon his own strength; and

Christ let him fall. But this wrought for his good, it cost him many a tear. "He went out, and wept bitterly" (Matt. 26:75). And now he grows less self-reliant. He dared not say he loved Christ more than the other apostles. "Do you love me more than these?" (John 21:15). He dared not say so--his fall into sin broke the neck of his pride!

The foiling by a temptation causes more circumspection and watchfulness in a child of God. Though Satan did before decoy him into sin--yet for the future he will be the more cautious. He will have a care of coming within the lion's chain any more. He is more vigilant and fearful of the occasions of sin. He never goes out without his spiritual armor, and he girds on his armor by prayer. He knows he walks on slippery ground, therefore he looks wisely to his steps. He keeps close sentinel in his soul, and when he spies the devil coming, he grasps his spiritual weapons, and displays the shield of faith (Eph. 6:16). This is all the hurt the devil does when he foils a saint by temptation--he cures him of his careless neglect; he makes him watch and pray more. When wild beasts get over the hedge and damage the grain, a man will make his fence the stronger. Just so, when the devil gets over the hedge by a temptation, a Christian will be sure to mend his fence; he will become more fearful of sin, and careful of duty. Thus the being worsted by temptation works for good.

Objection. But if being foiled works for good, this may make Christians careless whether they are overcome by temptations or not.

Answer. There is a great deal of difference between falling into a temptation, and running into a temptation. The falling into a temptation shall work for good, not the running into it. He who falls into a river is fit for help and pity--but he who desperately runs into it, is guilty of his own death. It is madness running into a lion's den. He who runs himself into a temptation is like king Saul--who fell upon his own sword.

From all that has been said, see how God disappoints the old serpent, making his temptations turn to the good of His people. Surely if the devil knew how much benefit accrues to the saints by temptation, he would forbear to tempt. Luther once said, "There are three things which make a godly man--prayer, meditation, and temptation." Paul, in his voyage to Rome, met with a contrary wind (Acts 27:4). So the wind of temptation is a contrary wind to that of the Spirit; but God makes use of this cross wind, to blow the saints to heaven!

3. The evil of DESERTION works for good to the godly.

The evil of desertion works for good. The spouse complains of desertion. "My beloved had withdrawn himself, and was gone!" (Cant. 5:6). There is a twofold withdrawing; either in regard of grace, when God suspends the influence of His Spirit, and withholds the lively actings of grace. If the Spirit is gone, grace freezes into a chillness and indolence. Or, a withdrawing in regard of comfort. When God withholds the sweet manifestations of His favor, He does not look with such a pleasant aspect--but veils His face, and seems to be quite gone from the soul.

God is just in all His withdrawals. We desert Him before He deserts us. We desert God--when we leave off close communion with Him; when we desert His truths and dare not appear for Him; when we leave the guidance and conduct of His word, and follow the deceitful light of our own corrupt affections and passions. We desert God first; therefore we have none to blame but ourselves.

Desertion is very sad, for as when the light is withdrawn, darkness follows in the air--so when God withdraws, there is darkness and sorrow in the soul. Desertion is an agony of conscience. God holds the

soul over hell. "The arrows of the Almighty are within me, the poison whereof drinks up my spirits" (Job 6:4). It was a custom among the Persians in their wars, to dip their arrows in the poison of serpents to make them more deadly. Thus did God shoot the poisoned arrow of desertion into Job, under the wounds of which his spirit lay bleeding. In times of desertion the people of God are apt to be dejected. They dispute against themselves, and think that God has quite cast them off. Therefore I shall prescribe some comfort to the deserted soul.

The mariner, when he has no star to guide him--yet he has light in his lantern, which is some help to him to see his compass; so, I shall lay down four consolations, which are as the mariner's lantern, to give some light when the poor soul is sailing in the darkness of desertion, and needs the bright morning star.

(1). None but the godly are capable of desertion. Wicked men do not know what God's love means--nor what it is to lack it. They know what it is to lack health, friends, trade--but not what it is to lack God's favor. You fear that you are not God's child because you are deserted. The Lord cannot be said to withdraw His love from the wicked, because they never had it. The being deserted, evidences you to be a child of God. How could you complain that God has estranged Himself, if you had not sometimes received smiles and tokens of love from Him?

(2). There may be the seed of grace, where there is not the flower of joy. The earth may lack a crop of grain--yet may have a mine of gold within! A Christian may have grace within, though the sweet fruit of joy does not grow. Vessels at sea, which are richly fraught with jewels and spices, may be in the dark and tossed in the storm. A soul enriched with the treasures of grace, may yet be in the dark of desertion, and so tossed as to think it shall be cast away in the storm! David, in a state of dejection, prays, "Take not your Holy Spirit from me" (Psalm 51:11). He does not pray, says Augustine, "Lord, give me your Spirit"--but "Take not away your Spirit", so that still he had the Spirit of God remaining in him.

(3). These desertions are but for a time. Christ may withdraw, and leave the soul awhile--but He will come again. "In a little wrath I hid my face from you for a moment--but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on you" (Isaiah 64:8). When it is low water--the tide will come in again. "I will not always show my anger." (Isaiah 57:16). The tender mother sets down her child in anger--but she will take it up again into her arms, and kiss it. God may put away the soul in anger--but He will take it up again into His dear embraces, and display His banner of love over it.

(4). HOW these desertions work for good to the godly.

1. Desertion cures the soul of sloth. We find the spouse fallen upon the bed of sloth: "I sleep" (Cant. 5:2). And presently Christ was gone. "My beloved had withdrawn himself" (Cant. 5:6). Who will speak to one that is drowsy?

2. Desertion cures inordinate affection to the world. "Love not the world" (1 John 2:15). We may hold the world as a posy in our hand--but it must not lie too near our heart! We may use it as an inn where we take a meal--but it must not be our home. Perhaps these secular things steal away the heart too much. Godly men are sometimes weighed down with an overabundance of temporal things, and drunk with the luscious delights of prosperity. And having spotted their silver wings of grace, and much defaced God's image by rubbing it against the earth--the Lord, to recover them from this, hides His face in a cloud. This eclipse has good effects--it darkens all the glory of the world, and causes it to disappear.

3. Desertion works for good--as it makes the saints prize God's countenance more than ever. "Your loving-kindness is better than life" (Psalm 63:3). Yet the commonness of this mercy lessens it in our esteem. When pearls grew common at Rome, they began to be slighted. God has no better way to make us value His love, than by withdrawing it awhile. If the sun shone but once a year, how would it be prized! When the soul has been long benighted with desertion, oh how welcome now is the return of the Sun of righteousness!

4. Desertion works for good--as it is the means of embittering sin to us. Can there be a greater misery than to have God's displeasure? What makes hell--but the hiding of God's face? And what makes God hide His face--but sin? "They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where they have laid him" (John 20:13). Just so, our sins have taken away the Lord, and we know not where He is laid. The favor of God is the best jewel; it can sweeten a prison, and unsting death. Oh, how odious then is that sin, which robs us of our best jewel! Sin made God desert His temple (Ezek. 8:6). Sin causes Him to appear as an enemy, and dress Himself in armor. This makes the soul pursue sin with a holy malice, and seek to be avenged on it! The deserted soul gives sin gall and vinegar to drink, and, with the spear of mortification, lets out the heart-blood of it!

5. Desertion works for good--as it sets the soul to weeping for the loss of God. When the sun is gone, the dew falls; and when God is gone, tears drop from the eyes. How Micah was troubled when he had lost his gods! "You've taken away all my gods--and I have nothing left!" (Judges 18:24). So when God is gone, what more do we have left? It is not the harp and violin, which can comfort--when God is gone. Though it is sad to lack God's presence--yet it is good to lament His absence.

6. Desertion sets the soul to seeking after God. When Christ was departed, the spouse pursues after Him, she "searched for him in all its streets and squares" (Cant. 3:2). And not having found Him, she makes a cry after Him, "Have you seen him anywhere, this one I love so much?" (Cant. 3:3). The deserted soul sends up whole volleys of sighs and groans. It knocks at heaven's gate by prayer--it can have no rest until the golden beams of God's face shine!

7. Desertion puts the Christian upon inquiry. He inquires the cause of God's departure. What is the accursed thing which has made God angry? Perhaps pride, perhaps sloth, perhaps worldliness. "I was angry and punished these greedy people. I withdrew myself from them" (Isaiah 57:17). Perhaps there is some secret sin allowed. A stone in the pipe hinders the current of water. Just so, sin lived in, hinders the sweet current of God's love. Thus conscience, as a bloodhound, having found out sin and overtaken it--this Achan is stoned to death!

8. Desertion works for good--as it gives us a sight of what Jesus Christ suffered for us. If the sipping of the cup is so bitter, how bitter was that full cup which Christ drank to the dregs upon the cross? He drank a cup of deadly poison, which made Him cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 22:46). None can so appreciate Christ's sufferings, none can be so fired with love to Christ--as those who have been humbled by desertion, and have been held over the flames of hell for a time.

9. Desertion works for good--as it prepares the saints for future comfort. The nipping frosts prepare for spring flowers. It is God's way, first to cast down, then to comfort (2 Cor. 7:6). When our Savior had been fasting--then the angels came and ministered to Him. When the Lord has kept His people long fasting--then He sends the Comforter, and feeds them with the hidden manna. "Light is sown for the righteous" (Psalm 97:11.) The saints' comforts may be hidden like seed under ground--but the seed is

ripening, and will increase, and flourish into a crop!

10. These desertions work for good--as they will make heaven the sweeter to us. Here on earth, our comforts are like the moon, sometimes they are in the full, sometimes in the wane. God shows Himself to us awhile, and then retires from us. How will this set off heaven the more, and make it more delightful and ravishing, when we shall have a constant aspect of love from God! (1 Thess. 4:17).

Thus we see desertions work for good. The Lord brings us into the deep of desertion--that He may not bring us into the deep of damnation! He puts us into a seeming hell--that He may keep us from a real hell. God is fitting us for that time when we shall enjoy His smiles forever, when there shall be neither clouds in His face or sun setting, when Christ shall come and stay with His spouse, and the spouse shall never say again, "My beloved has withdrawn himself!"

4. The evil of SIN works for good to the godly.

Sin in its own nature, is damnable--but God in His infinite wisdom overrules it, and causes good to arise from that which seems most to oppose it. Indeed, it is a matter of wonder, that any honey should come out of this lion! We may understand it in a double sense.

(1). The sins of OTHERS are overruled for good to the godly. It is no small trouble to a gracious heart to live among the wicked. "Woe is me--that I dwell in Mesech" (Psalm 120:5). Yet even this the Lord turns to good. For,

(1.) The sins of others work for good to the godly--as they produce holy sorrow. God's people weep for what they cannot reform. "Rivers of tears run down my eyes, because they keep not your law" (Psalm 119. 136). David was a mourner for the sins of the times; his heart was turned into a spring--and his eyes into rivers! Wicked men make merry with sin. "When you do evil, then you rejoice" (Jer. 11:15). But the godly are weeping doves; they grieve for the oaths and blasphemies of the age. The sins of others, like spears, pierce their souls!

This grieving for the sins of others is good. It shows a childlike heart, to resent with sorrow the injuries done to our heavenly Father. It also shows a Christ-like heart. "He was grieved for the hardness of their hearts" (Mark 3:5). The Lord takes special notice of these tears. He likes it well--that we should weep when His glory suffers. It argues more grace to grieve for the sins of others, than for our own. We may grieve for our own sins--out of fear of hell; but to grieve for the sins of others--is from a principle of love to God. These tears drop as water from roses--they are sweet and fragrant, and God puts them in His bottle! "You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book!" (Psalm 56:8)

(2.) The sins of others work for good to the godly--as they set them the more a praying against sin. If there were not such a spirit of wickedness abroad, perhaps there would not be such a spirit of prayer. Crying sins cause crying prayers! The people of God pray against the iniquity of the times--that God will give a check to sin, that He will put sin to the blush. If they cannot pray down sin, they pray against it; and this God takes kindly. These prayers shall both be recorded and rewarded. Though we do not prevail in prayer, we shall not lose our prayers. "My prayer returned into my own bosom" (Psalm 35:13).

(3.) The sins of others work for good--as they make us the more in love with grace. The sins of others are a foil to set off the luster of grace the more. One contrary sets off another: deformity sets off beauty. The

sins of the wicked do much disfigure them. Pride is a disfiguring sin; now the beholding another's pride makes us the more in love with humility! Malice is a disfiguring sin, it is the devil's picture; the more of this we see in others the more we love meekness and charity. Drunkenness is a disfiguring sin, it turns men into beasts, it deprives of the use of reason; the more intemperate we see others, the more we must love sobriety. The black face of sin, sets off the beauty of holiness so much the more.

(4.) The sins of others work for good--as they work in us the stronger opposition against sin. "The wicked have broken your law; therefore I love your commandments" (Psalm 119:126, 127). David would never have loved God's law so much, if the wicked had not set themselves so much against it. The more violent others are against the truth, the more valiant the saints are for it. Living fish swim against the stream. Just so, the more the tide of sin comes in, the more the godly swim against it! The impieties of the times provoke holy passions in the saints! That anger is without sin--which is against sin. The sins of others are as a whetstone to set the sharper edge upon us; they whet our zeal and indignation against sin the more!

(5.) The sins of others work for good--as they make us more earnest in working out our salvation. When we see wicked men take such pains for hell--this makes us more industrious for heaven. The wicked have nothing to encourage them--yet they sin. They venture shame and disgrace, they break through all opposition. Scripture is against them, and conscience is against them, there is a flaming sword in the way--yet they sin. Godly hearts, seeing the wicked thus mad for the forbidden fruit, and wearing out themselves in the devil's service--are the more emboldened and quickened in the ways of God. They will take heaven as it were, by storm. The wicked are like camels--running after sin (Jer. 2:23). And do we creep like snails in piety? Shall impure sinners do the devil more service--than we do Christ? Shall they make more haste to go to the prison of hell--than we do to the kingdom of heaven? Are they never weary of sinning--and are we weary of praying? Have we not a better Master than they? Are not the paths of virtue pleasant? Is not there joy in the way of duty, and heaven at the end? The activity of the sons of Belial in sin--this is a spur to the godly to make them mend their pace, and run the faster to heaven!

(6.) The sins of others work for good--as they are looking-glasses in which we may see our own hearts. Do we see a heinous, impious wretch? Behold a picture of our own hearts! Such would we be--if God left us! What is in wicked men's practice--is in our nature. Sin in the wicked is like fire which flames and blazes forth; sin in the godly is like fire in the embers. Christian, though you do not break forth into a flame of scandalous sin--yet you have no cause to boast, for there is as much sin in the embers of your nature. You have the root of all sin in you, and would bear as hellish fruit as any ungodly wretch--if God did not either curb you by His power, or change you by His grace!

(7.) The sins of others work for good--as they are the means of making the people of God more thankful. When you see another infected with the plague, how thankful are you that God has preserved you from it! It is a good use that may be made of the sins of others--to make us more thankful. Why might not God have left us to the same excess of wickedness? Think with yourself, O Christian--why should God be more merciful to you than to another? Why should He snatch you, as brand plucked out of the fire--and not him? How may this make you to adore free grace! What the Pharisee said boastingly, we may say thankfully, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers, etc." (Luke 18:11).

If we are not as wicked as others--we should adore the riches of free-grace! Every time we see men hastening on in sin--we are to thank God that we are not such. If we see an insane person--we thank God that it is not so with us. Much more when we see others under the power of Satan--how thankful we should be, that this is no longer our condition! "For we too were once foolish, disobedient, deceived, captives of

various passions and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, detesting one another." Titus 3:3

(8.) The sins of others work for good--as they are means of making God's people better. Christian, God can make you a gainer by another's sin. The more unholy others are--the more holy you should be. The more a wicked man gives himself to sin--the more a godly man gives himself to prayer. "But I give myself to prayer" (Psalm 109:4).

(9.) The sins of others work for good--as they give an occasion to us of doing good. Were there no sinners, we could not be in such a capacity for service. The godly are often the means of converting the wicked; their prudent advice and pious example is a lure and a bait to draw sinners to the embracing of the gospel. The disease of the patient, works for the good of the physician; by healing the patient, the physician enriches himself. Just so, by converting sinners from the error of their way, our crown comes to be enlarged. "Those who turn many to righteousness, shall shine as the stars forever and ever" (Dan. 12:31). Not as lamps or candles--but as the stars forever! Thus we see the sins of others are overruled for our good.

(2.) The sense of their OWN sinfulness, will be overruled for the good of the godly. Thus our own sins shall work for good. This must be understood carefully, when I say the sins of the godly work for good--not that there is the least good in sin. Sin is like poison, which corrupts the blood, and infects the heart; and, without a sovereign antidote, sin always brings death. Such is the venomous nature of sin--it is deadly and damning. Sin is worse than hell. But yet God, by His mighty over-ruling power, makes sin in the outcome turn to the good of His people. Hence that golden saying of Augustine, "God would never permit evil--if He could not bring good out of evil." The feeling of sinfulness in the saints, works for good several ways.

(1.) Sin makes them weary of this life. That sin is in the godly--is sad; but that it is their burden--is good. Paul's afflictions (pardon the expression) were but child's play to him--in comparison of his sin. He rejoiced in tribulation (2 Cor. 7:4). But how did this bird of paradise weep and bemoan himself under his sins! "Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Romans 8:24). A believer carries his sins as a prisoner his shackles; oh, how does he long for the day of release! This sense of sin is good.

(2.) This indwelling of corruption, makes the saints prize Christ more. He who feels his sin, as a sick man feels his sickness--how welcome is Christ the physician to him! He who feels himself stung with sin--how precious is the brazen serpent to him! When Paul had bemoaned his body of death--how thankful was he for Christ! "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 8:25). Christ's blood saves from sin, and is the sacred ointment which kills this deadly disease of sin.

(3.) This sense of sin works for good--as it is an occasion of putting the soul upon six special duties:

(a) Sin puts the soul upon self-searching. A child of God being conscious of sin, takes the candle and lantern of the Word, and searches into his heart. He desires to know the worst of himself; as a man who is diseased in body, desires to know the worst of his disease. Though our joy lies in the knowledge of our graces--yet there is some benefit in the knowledge of our corruptions. Therefore Job prays, "Reveal to me my transgression and sin" (Job 13:23). It is good to know our sins--that we may not flatter ourselves, or take our condition to be better than it is. It is good to find out our sins--lest they find us out!

(b) Sin puts a child of God upon self-abasing. Sin is left in a godly man--as a cancer in the breast, or a hunch upon the back--to keep him from being proud. Gravel and dirt are good to ballast a ship, and keep it from overturning; the sense of sin helps to ballast the soul, that it be not overturned with pride. We read of

the "spots of God's children" (Deut. 32:5). When a godly man beholds his face in the looking-glass of Scripture--he sees the spots of pride, lust and hypocrisy. They are humbling spots--and make the plumes of pride fall off! It is a good use that may be made even of our sins, when they occasion low thoughts of ourselves. Better is that sin which humbles me--than that duty which makes me proud! Holy Bradford uttered these words of himself, "I am but a painted hypocrite"; and Hooper said, "Lord, I am hell--and You are heaven."

(c) Sin puts a child of God on self-judging. He passes a sentence upon himself. "I am more brutish than any man" (Proverbs 30:2). It is dangerous to judge others--but it is good to judge ourselves. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment" (1 Cor. 11:31). When a man has judged himself, Satan is put out of office. When Satan lays anything to a saint's charge, he is able to retort and say, "It is true, Satan, I am guilty of these sins; but I have judged myself already for them; and having condemned myself in the lower court of conscience, God will acquit me in the upper court of heaven."

(d) Sin puts a child of God upon self-conflicting. Spiritual self conflicts with carnal self. "The spirit lusts against the flesh" (Gal. 5:17). Our life is a wayfaring life--and a war-faring life. There is a duel fought every day between the two seeds. A believer will not let sin have peaceable possession. If he cannot keep sin out, he will keep sin down; though he cannot quite overcome--yet he is overcoming. "To him who is overcoming" (Rev. 2:7).

(e) Sin puts a child of God upon self-observing. He knows sin is a bosom traitor, therefore he carefully observes himself. A subtle and deceitful heart, needs a watchful eye. The heart is like a castle which is continually in danger to be assaulted; this makes a child of God to be always a sentinel, and keep a guard over his heart. A believer has a strict eye over himself, lest he fall into any scandalous sin--and so open a sluice to let all his comfort run out.

(f) Sin puts the soul upon self-reforming. A child of God does not only find out sin--but drives out sin! One foot he sets upon the neck of his sins--and the other foot he "turns to God's testimonies" (Psalm 119. 59). Thus the sins of the godly work for good. God makes the saints' maladies--their medicines.

But let none abuse this doctrine. I do not say that sin works for good to an impenitent person. No, it works for his damnation! Sin only works for good to those who love God; and for you who are godly, I know you will not draw a wrong conclusion from this--either to make light of sin, or to make bold with sin. If you should do so, God will make it cost you dearly! Remember David. He ventured presumptuously on sin, and what did he get? He lost his peace, he felt the terrors of the Almighty in his soul, though he had all helps to cheerfulness. He was a king; he had skill in music; yet nothing could administer comfort to him; he complains of his "broken bones" (Psalm 51:8). And though he did at last come out of that dark cloud--yet perhaps he never recovered his full joy to his dying day. If any of God's people should be tampering with sin, because God can turn it to good; though the Lord does not damn them--He may send them to hell in this life. He may put them into such bitter agonies and soul convulsions, as may fill them full of horror, and make them draw near to despair. Let this be a flaming sword to keep them from coming near the forbidden tree!

And thus have I shown, that the worst things, by the overruling hand of the great God--do work together for the good of the saints.

Again, I say--think not lightly of sin!

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