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**MAN'S
TOTAL INABILITY
& RESTORATION
TO HOLINESS**

WILHELMUS A BRAKEL

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Man's Total Inability and Restoration to Holiness

by Wilhelmus à Brakel

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Free Will Defined

Having considered original and actual sin, we must also consider man's total inability to lift himself out of this sinful state and to restore himself in a state of holiness. This subject is generally considered under the heading "free will."

In Greek Free Will is referred to as αὐτεξουσία (autExusia). This word is not to be found in Scripture, but was introduced into the church by Platonic philosophers who had been converted to Christianity.

In its essential meaning it means as much as self-determination, self-worthiness , or to be one's own master . As such it can only be properly used in reference to God. However, in some respects it may be used in reference to man as well. In Latin the words liberum arbitrium are used, which translates as free judgment or free will.

God has gifted the soul of man with intellect and a will. The intellect consists of comprehension, judgment, and conscience. The faculty of judgment makes either a general determination about the validity of a matter and what sort of a thing it is, or it applies itself to the will of man suggesting and determining what is or is not to be done, or what is to be loved or to be hated. The will of man consists of the ability to either love or hate something. A comprehensive treatment of these

matters is to be found in chapter 10, where the nature of the soul, the intellect, and the will are discussed.

The Freedom of the Will: Not Neutrality but One of Necessary Consequence

In our discussion of free will it should be noted first of all that man's free will is not independent from God. Man is totally dependent upon God in regard 1) to his being, 2) to his activity, 3) to God's prerogative to obligate him to His will and laws (so that His commands must be loved and what He has forbidden is to be hated), and 4) to the foreknowledge and decree of God, for He infallibly knows and has decreed that every matter and deed will have a certain outcome and none other. This foreknowledge cannot be thwarted; and this decree cannot be changed. These matters have been discussed comprehensively in chapters three, five, and eleven.

Secondly, the will does not function independently from the judgment faculty of the intellect. The will cannot possibly function apart from the intellect, neither can it do otherwise than follow the dictates of the intellect, for man is a rational being and therefore functions rationally. Otherwise the will would be able to reject that which is good as well as that which is perceived as being good, and find delight in sin as sin— all of which is irrational.

Thirdly, the will of man is not free from human peculiarities, for man functions according to his nature. A man who is perfectly holy in his nature will be a servant of righteousness, and the will shall respond likewise (Rom. 6:18). However, if man is nothing but sin in all his characteristics, he is a servant of sin (John 8:34). The will responds

and functions in harmony with man's sinful nature. To a holy nature belongs a holy will, and to a sinful nature a sinful will.

Even though the will is necessarily dependent upon the matters mentioned, this necessity does not eliminate the freedom of the will, nor is this necessity compulsory in nature, since the will responds spontaneously.

(1) The will is free from external compulsion. All the people on earth cannot force someone's will or cause him to do something which he is not willing to do. In order to cause someone to do another's will, however, the matter must be presented in such a manner that the person voluntarily chooses and wills, and thus functions according to his own will.

(2) The will of man is also free from natural instinct, by which animals, without being conscious of it, are motivated to function according to their purpose, for the will responds to the intellect and functions rationally.

Having considered in which respects the will of man is either free or not free, the question now presents itself: Wherein does the freedom of the will actually consist? Does it consist in neutrality so that it makes no difference whether or not we do something, or whether we do a certain thing or act to the contrary? Or is this freedom one of "necessary consequence," man doing what he does by virtue of personal choice, personal desire, and thus spontaneously?

Roman Catholics and Arminians respond by saying that this freedom consists in being neutral as far as either doing or not doing something, or doing a certain thing or acting to the contrary. Our response is that the will of man when considered in its essential nature, not being subject to any conditions, is neutral and

unrestricted as far as doing a certain thing or the contrary thereof. It remains in this neutral position until the faculty judgment determines what ought or what not ought not to be done. Once such a determination has been made by judgmental application, the will can no longer remain neutral, can no longer but will to do this, and cannot refrain from willing to do the one thing rather than the contrary. Thus, the freedom of the will does not consist in neutrality; that is, the ability to will or not to will, or to will either one thing or the contrary, even if all requirements and restrictions were in place. Rather, the freedom of the will is one of necessary consequence.

This is first of all evident from the nature of God, the angels, the glorified in Christ, and also the devils. God cannot but be holy, righteous, and true. His will cannot but desire this and cannot act to the contrary. However, is not God's will free to the superlative degree? The holy angels and glorified saints cannot will to either do good or evil. They can only will to be good and to do good. Is not their will entirely free? The Lord Jesus Christ could not will to be either obedient or disobedient to His Father. He could not do anything but be willing to obey His Father. Was not His will absolutely free? It is impossible for devils to will that which is good. They cannot but will to do that which is evil. In all these things there is an absolute freedom of will, but there is no neutrality as far as being willing or not willing to do something, or to will a certain thing or just its opposite. Thus, the freedom of the will does not consist in neutrality, but is one of necessary consequence.

Secondly, even though one can speculate about the will in its abstract nature, the will at no time functions outside the parameters of God's providence, the faculty of judgment, and natural inclinations. Therefore, even when all requirements for its functioning are present, the will cannot arbitrarily function or not function, or do a

certain thing or the contrary. Rather, it voluntarily embraces that to which it is limited by God and the faculty of judgment, and thus it does not remain neutral.

Thirdly, it is entirely absurd to define the freedom of the will as consisting in neutrality. If this were so, man could desire his damnation and to be eternally miserable, never to partake of supreme felicity; or he could choose the opposite: to acquire this felicity, the will being neutral towards both options. It would then be in vain to pray for conversion, for then even by divine operation the will could not be nudged from its neutral position, and man would always be able to will that he remain unconverted. Then God would have no power over the human will, but the will would remain independent, having as much control over itself as God does. This of course is absurdity itself.

Since the freedom of the will does not consist in neutrality, it is therefore clear that the freedom of the will is one of necessary consequence. This is not an irrational instinct as in animals, but by one's own intelligent choice, willing, desiring, and embracing that which one by way of the faculty of judgment perceives as necessary or desirous at this particular place and time.

Man's Free Will After the Fall

Now the question is: Is man such a slave to sin that he wills nothing else, and cannot will, but to live in sin? Our reference here is to the will and not to desire. Also, can man both will to convert himself and to keep the law by powerfully and actively engaging his will? Or is man's will after the fall still neutral as far as repenting or not

repenting, doing good or doing evil? In short, did sinful man retain sufficient natural ability to enable him to truly repent?

Roman Catholicism and Arminians answer affirmatively; we respond negatively. In order to understand this clearly, we must distinguish between various kinds of goodness and various states of man. There are four types of activity which can be considered good.

(1) There is natural goodness: eating, drinking, walking, standing, speaking, sleeping, etc.

(2) There is civil goodness: being courteous, friendly, helpful, sincere, and upright in daily conversation.

(3) There is external religious goodness: hearing and reading God's Word, offering of a mentally formulated prayer, the giving of alms, etc.

(4) There is spiritual goodness proceeding from internal union with God in Christ, and thus from the principle of spiritual life. This consists in faith, love, godly fear, obedience towards God as Father, complete submission to and acquiescence with God's will, and the performance of this will. The question does not relate to the first three kinds of goodness, but to the latter.

There is also a fourfold distinction in regard to man's state. There is 1) the state of perfection prior to the fall, 2) the unregenerate state after the fall, 3) the regenerate state, and 4) the state of glory. The question neither pertains to the first nor the last two states, but only to the second one. The question therefore is: Is an unconverted person able to convert himself, regenerate himself, truly believe in Christ, and live a truly holy and spiritual life? We emphatically deny

this. This is evident first of all from man's evil condition prior to conversion, being blind, ignorant, evil, and unwilling. He is hostile, unable, unwilling to subject himself to the law of God, and spiritually dead. "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Rom. 8:7; cf. chapter 30).

Sin and Punishment

Conversion is a work of God, consisting in creating, regenerating, drawing, the removal of the stony heart and the giving of a heart of flesh, etc. (cf. chapter 30). Having considered man's misery relative to his first fall, original sin, actual sin, and his spiritual impotency, we will also consider his misery in respect to deserved punishment.

Punishment presupposes the existence of a rational creature which is subject to a law. Thus, the evil which comes upon animals in reality is not a punishment inflicted upon them, but either is executed in regard to man as proprietor of the animal, to prevent them from being able to harm man, or due to the curse resulting from the first sin, God thereby revealing His just wrath against the sin of mankind. For this reason the pushing ox had to be killed, Achan's cattle were killed along with him, and all the animals died in the flood.

All punishment proceeds from God. God does not punish a holy creature—He punished Christ only because He as Surety had taken sin upon Himself—but punishes the sinner as a righteous Judge. "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (Rom. 1:18); "... against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God; who will render to

every man according to his deeds” (Rom. 2:5–6). To that end God uses all such creatures as pleases Him, such as the sun, moon, and stars (Judg. 5:20), rain and wind (Ps. 148:8), angels (Acts 12:23), devils (Job 1–2), man (Isa. 10:24), and insects (Joel 1:4; 2:25).

Sin is the cause of and reason for this punishment. “For the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23); “Thine own wickedness shall correct thee, and thy backslidings shall reprove thee” (Jer. 2:19). Yes, every sin merits eternal condemnation. “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all” (James 2:10). Every sin is a complete rejection of the eternal God, and by its very nature causes the sinner to remain in an eternally sinful condition. This is the reason for the righteous threatening found in Galatians 3:10, “Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.”

We can make a twofold distinction relative to punishment: temporal and eternal.

Temporal punishments are either corporal or spiritual in nature. There are many corporal punishments, such as bodily want, sickness, discomfort, pestilence, war, times of scarcity, and death. For the godly these are fatherly chastisements which proceed from love and are inflicted for their welfare. For the ungodly they are judgments which proceed from the avenging justice and wrath of God. “I will reprove thee, and set them in order before thine eyes” (Ps. 50:21).

Spiritual judgments include:

(1) The withdrawal of abused spiritual illumination. “. . . their foolish heart was darkened” (Rom. 1:21); “Because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this cause God shall

send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie” (2 Th. 2:10–11).

(2) The giving over of man to himself, whereby he falls from one sin into the next. “But my people would not hearken to my voice; and Israel would none of me. So I gave them up unto their own hearts’ lust: and they walked in their own counsels” (Ps. 81:11–12); “Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts” (Rom. 1:24).

(3) The hardening of the heart. “And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart . . . and Pharaoh’s heart was hardened” (Ex. 7:3, 22). From these texts it is evident that God in His holiness punishes sin with sin.

Eternal punishment is referred to as death (Rom. 6:23), the second death (Rev. 20:6), the damnation of hell (Mat. 23:33), hell fire (Mat. 5:22), and everlasting fire (Mat. 25:41). It is also expressed by way of the place where this punishment will be endured, such as, the place of torment (Luke 16:28), the deep (Luke 8:31), and the lake of fire burning with sulfur and brimstone (Rev. 19:20). This place is generally referred to as “hell.” In Greek two words are used, one of which is ᾗδης (hades), which is also used by pagans to refer to hell. The other word is γέεννα (gehenna), which is used in Scripture only. This word is derived from “the valley of the children of Hinnom,” which was an accursed place where the Israelites burned their children in the fire in honor of the idol Moloch, and which Josiah transformed into a valley of horror by causing all manner of abomination to be brought there, so that, due to this horrendous sin, this valley would be abhorred (2 Ki. 23:10). (In Hebrew hell is called שְׁאֵל [sheol], which is a pit.)

The place where eternal punishment will be endured is not fictitious, merely existing in man's imagination. It is a place which truly exists at this very moment and does not still need to be created. The devils are exiled to this place, even though they will be released prior to the final judgment (2 Pet. 2:4). The Sodomites suffer the vengeance of eternal fire (Jude 1:7). The souls of the ungodly upon departing from the body at the moment of death are always sent to this place (Luke 16:23).

The Punishment of the Ungodly Does not Consist in Annihilation

This raises the following question: Does eternal punishment consist in the annihilation of soul and body? Will the essence of both soul and body of the ungodly continue to exist and be in inexpressible pain to all eternity?

Socinius held to the first view, whereas we hold to the latter.

This is first of all confirmed by the resurrection of the ungodly. "There shall be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and unjust" (Acts 24:15). All men upon the face of the earth will be divided into two categories, there being no third category. The unjust will be resurrected as well as the just. They will together appear before the Judge of all the earth, being resurrected for that purpose. ". . . and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation" (John 5:29). The Father has vested Christ with the authority to execute judgment. Since Christ will judge all men, it must be that all men will be present, and since most have already died, it follows that they must be resurrected. The Lord Jesus

testifies of this in John 5:28, “For the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves,” etc. This is true for all who have died, in whatever manner it might be, even if they have returned to dust and their dust has mingled with the earth. In vs. 29 He identifies both the person and his destination. No mention is made here of a spiritual resurrection, as there is in vss. 24–25. Rather, mention is made of those who have no part in the spiritual resurrection. All men are

not regenerated, and those who are resurrected spiritually cannot be resurrected unto damnation, as is stated for those who have done evil. Thus it remains certain that mention is made here of a corporal resurrection and also of the resurrection of those who have done evil. Since the ungodly will be resurrected and also appear in the judgment, they were not annihilated in death. This is true of the souls of Cain and Judas who went to their own place. Likewise all the souls of the ungodly still exist in their essence, and are in prison with the spirits of the ungodly of the first world (1 Pet. 3:19). Neither have they been annihilated subsequent to their entering this prison.

Secondly, the soul of man is immortal in nature. Man cannot kill it, and God will not kill it. “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear Him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mat. 10:28). When the soul is joined together with the body, or contrasted with it, this indicates nothing else than the one essential element of man. (The nature of the soul was discussed in chapter 10.) This essential element of man cannot be killed by men. All human violence is directed towards the body, and the ultimate possibility is the killing of the body. If the soul were to be annihilated at death, man would be able to kill the soul as well as the body. Since man is not capable of doing this, however, it remains clear and certain that the soul continues to exist after the body dies. This is the force of Christ’s argument: one need not fear

man, but must fear God, who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell. The verb ἀποκτείναι (apoktainai), that is, to kill(which refers to a human act) is not used here, but rather ἀπολέσαι (apolesai), that is, to destroy in hell. The body will be resurrected and united to the soul, upon which the ungodly with body and soul will be cast into hell to be tormented there, this being an everlasting destruction (2 Th. 1:9). At first glance the meaning of Matthew 10:28 appears to be this: God ought to be feared more than man, since man can harm the body but not the soul. God, however, can punish both body and soul eternally in hell, the place of the damned. Thus the soul is not annihilated at death, but the ungodly will be tormented eternally.

Thirdly, Matthew 26:24 also confirms that the ungodly will not be annihilated, but will be in eternal misery. We read there: “It had been good for that man if he had not been born.” Nowhere do we read about Judas’ misery in this life, for in the end he even received money which could have fully rewarded him. He could have enjoyed the favor of the enemies, and his death was sudden and accompanied with little pain. If this were to have annihilated him, why would it have been better if he had never been born? Rather, these words clearly indicate that his miseries after death would be dreadful and unbearable. Thus the ungodly continue to exist after death in torment.

Fourthly, this is also confirmed by all the texts which state expressly that the ungodly will eternally endure pain. “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels,” “. . . and these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal” (Mat. 25:41, 46). Fire in Scripture does not always refer to physical fire, but to pain of the severest sort. The devils are subject to this, upon whom physical fire has no effect. They themselves understand it to be so. “Art thou come hither to torment

us before the time?” (Mat. 8:29). The Lord Jesus Himself explains it as such. That which He calls “fire” in vs. 31, He refers to as “punishment” in vs. 46. This fire, this punishment, is referred to as being eternal. The word “eternal” occasionally refers to a very long period of time, but it generally refers to infinity. Even if one were to use the first meaning, it still would be evident that the

ungodly are not annihilated—neither in death nor in the judgment. The reference here is to infinity, as is indicated by way of contrast. Eternal life unquestionably refers to an endless state of felicity, and it is contrasted with another state, namely, of punishment. Therefore the Sodomites are said to suffer “the vengeance of eternal fire” (Jude 7). Sodom was completely destroyed by fire; her inhabitants, however (the name of the city refers to its inhabitants who were guilty of fornication), will eternally suffer punishment.

Add to this Mark 9:43–44, where we read, “. . . go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: where their worm dieth not.” It is obvious that this does not refer to what man encounters in this life, but to what he will experience after his death in hell, in the place where the rich man was after his death (Luke 16). Hell, the place of the damned, is referred to as fire due to the severity of the pain. It is said to be unquenchable since it will endlessly endure. Without end it will torment the ungodly who will also endure forever. The worm of the ungodly, that is, their conscience, will never die . If the conscience of the ungodly endures forever, this is necessarily true also for the ungodly themselves. Therefore, the word “unquenchable” neither means “until it has accomplished its task” nor “as long as there is something on which to gnaw,” that is, during this life. Rather, it is written that this will not occur here, but in hell, that is, after this life. Christ contrasts pain caused during this life by the

cutting off of hands and feet, with eternal pain, exhorting to endure the first in order to be delivered from the latter. No one enters hell in this life, but only after death.

Fifthly, if eternal punishment were to consist of annihilation, the animals would also be enduring eternal punishment and it would be correct to join with the Epicurians in saying, “Let us eat and drink; for to morrow we die,” which is contrary to 1 Corinthians 15:32. Then the following would not be a true statement: “seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you” (2 Th. 1:6), since this does not always occur in this life.

It thus remains absolutely certain that eternal punishment does not consist in the annihilation of soul and body, but that both will endure while experiencing eternal torment.

The Infinite Duration of God’s Judgment upon Sin

Objection #1:

God’s mercy cannot permit His creatures to be tormented eternally. Such punishment would not be commensurate with sin, and thus even God’s justice could not demand eternal punishment.

Answer:

Such thoughts are the result of ignorance concerning God’s character and the nature of sin, as well as from an attitude of disrespect and unbelief concerning God’s Word. Since God’s Word states it to be so,

who are you to argue against it? God's avenging justice is natural to His character, so that He, as we have demonstrated in chapter three, cannot but punish sin. Sin is inherently infinite due to being committed against an infinite God. It is a total rejection of God and a radical act of divorcement from Him. The sinner will eternally continue in a sinful state, and therefore God's wrath will also justly continue to rest upon him. There is no contradiction between God's mercy and His justice, for both have different objects. The sinner, due to his sin, is the object of God's justice; believers, for whom Christ has satisfied divine justice, are the objects of God's mercy.

Eternal punishment consists in deprivation and sensibility. The damned will have an eternal and essential existence; however, they will eternally miss all that which constitutes felicity, such as all light, communion with God and Christ, peace, rest, joy, love, and holiness. Yes, they will one day be deprived of all good things which God in His longsuffering permitted them to enjoy in this life. Then the damned, who will continue to exist as rational creatures, will no longer be insensitive to the fact that they are without God—as is currently the case because they now divert themselves with the enjoyment of temporal things. Since, however, they will then be deprived of all things and be unable to find satisfaction within themselves, they will be in a most horrible and grievous condition. Since there will neither be any expectation of fulfillment of their needs nor of refreshment throughout eternity, they will be filled with unrest and anger towards God who will deprive them of all things, as well as despair, since this will endure forever without the least expectation of relief. Even if hell were to consist only of deprivation, it would already be unbearable. We cannot comprehend this now, since here we are never without some measure of relief. Paul spoke of this state when he wrote: "Who shall be punished with everlasting

destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power” (2 Th. 1:9).

Eternal punishment also consists in sensibility, which we have already demonstrated extensively above. However, the nature and dreadfulness of that which will be experienced is incomprehensible. Paul expressed it as follows, “Indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish . . .” (Rom. 2:8–9). Daniel refers to it as “shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan. 12:2). It is generally referred to as “fire,” “pain,” “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” God, in the totality of His Being, will be against them, and they will forever be filled with the wrath of God. We will demonstrate shortly how unbearable this will be. What an utter despair this will generate, since there will be no relief and no expectation that this will be diminished in the least unto all eternity! Along with this the body will endure pain of the severest degree, the nature of which, however, is not known to us.

To the question, “Will there be fire in hell?”, we answer affirmatively, for Scripture states it to be so. The manner in which it will be present is not known to us, however, neither do we gain anything by knowing it. Happy is he who will not have to experience it. The location of hell I do not wish to investigate.

To the question, “Will one person endure more pain than another?” we also answer affirmatively, for Scripture clearly states this to be so. Even though it is common to all that there will eternally be neither annihilation, refreshment, nor deliverance, hell will be more unbearable for the one than for the other, all of this being commensurate with the degree in which they have sinned. “But I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you” (Mat. 11:22); “Therefore ye shall receive the

greater damnation” (Mat. 23:14). In Luke 12:47 and 48 few or many stripes are mentioned in relation to the degree of sin.

Our Misery: A Reflection upon our Sinfulness

Thus we have demonstrated to you the misery of man from various perspectives. We have done so in reference to the fall of Adam, original sin, actual sin, man’s impotency, and punishment upon sin. Do not rest in a mere external knowledge of all this, but make practical use of it, applying it all to yourself, and view yourself as such. Be it known to you, and impress it upon your heart, that you are the most miserable creature upon the face of the earth. If you could but perceive a glimmer of your misery, your hair would stand up straight from terror, your eyes would never fail to weep, and you would continually gnash your teeth and wring your hands. Therefore listen attentively to me as I address you. May the Lord cause you to see and feel all this, for you are miserable in many respects.

First, you are miserable in respect to your sinfulness . Go to Paradise and behold how ingeniously and gloriously you were created in Adam, enjoying sweet communion between God and your very own nature. Behold how willfully you have fallen away from God and have joined ranks with the devil. Having thus sinned, you have forfeited the glory of God. The image of God in which you were created in Adam has departed from you. Neither life, truth, love, holiness, nor glory are to be found in you. Instead, the appearance of a wretched black devil is within you. Your soul is in an evil, devilish condition, and is blind and unable to receive the things of the Spirit of God. It is

alienated from the life of God through ignorance, dead in sin, capable of devising and committing all manner of evil, having no other desire but for that which God hates, and having no contempt for anything but that which God delights in. Your soul wallows in filth, stench, abomination, and in that which is despicable and intolerable.

Your soul is a pool teeming with all manner of hateful, envious, wrathful, evil, impure, unrighteous, deceitful, and proud thoughts—thoughts by which you forget, depart from, and despise God, all of which are abominable in nature.

Your throat is an open sepulcher; with your tongue you use deceit. The poison of asps is under your lips, and your mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Your eyes, ears, hands, feet, and all the members of your body are instruments of unrighteousness; you are a servant of sin in the fullest sense of the word. You are of your father the devil, a prisoner of Satan, and the property of the devil. You are thus separated from God, desiring also to remain separated from Him, finding delight in your evil frame and deeds. In one word, inwardly and outwardly you are in a state of direct opposition and enmity towards the high, holy, and glorious God.

What aggravates the abominable nature of your existence, however, is that there is not one honest person to be found in your generation, but rather you belong to a generation which is despicable, hateful, evil, and impure. There is not one single individual in your entire genealogy—even if you trace back your genealogy for five thousand years, and thus to Adam—who by nature is not a liar, a murderer, a thief, a fornicator, and a horrendous monstrosity at heart. You are an unclean thing out of an unclean (Job 14:4), of the earth earthy (1 Cor. 15:47), by nature a child of wrath (Eph. 2:3), evil from your youth (Gen. 8:21). Give careful attention to these and similar passages of

Scripture, and come into the presence of God. Hear these words as coming from the mouth of the Lord, hearing Him declaring you to be such a person.

Impress this upon your heart, and be convinced beyond any doubt that this is descriptive of you, since He declares you to be such.

It is necessary that the view of your sinfulness exceeds that view which is the result of a mere believing in the Word of God. In order to be truly humbled and to be a suitable recipient of grace in Christ, there must be a sensible perception of this. For this purpose it is essential that you do not merely examine yourself in the mirror of the law of nature, measuring your deeds by that which nature teaches to be good or evil, but that you seek to acquire a thorough knowledge of your virtues and vices in light of the law of the ten commandments . For this purpose you should carefully read Lord's Days 34 through 44 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Do not merely seek to acquire an extensive knowledge of the subject matter itself—that is, do not merely seek to discern what are good or evil thoughts, words, and deeds—but also consider their very nature as commandments, and consider that every deed must proceed:

(1) from a consciousness of being reconciled and united to God, so that one does not serve Him as a strange God and provoked Judge, but rather as an appeased Father;

(2) from a conscious submission of one's self as creature to Him who only is Lord, who by virtue of His and our natures obligates us to be subject to Him in all things;

(3) from joyful willingness and obedience;

(4) from pure love;

(5) from a view and consciousness of His supremacy and majesty, and thus in the fear of His Name;

(6) from a joyful embracing of His will, solely because it is His will, so that our will is also swallowed up in His will;

(7) from an intense yearning that He alone be glorified, and that He alone is worthy of all honor and service, this being our sole objective;

(8) from an earnest zeal and devotion, until each deed be accomplished in all its particulars.

In one word, all things must be performed as proceeding from God, in dependence upon Him, and as before His countenance; and all must end in Him. With this in mind one will not be satisfied with the mere performance of one good deed, but will perceive how dreadfully one has fallen short—even in his best deeds, and thus how dreadful every sin is.

Be frequently engaged in this fashion, and examine your entire conversation both as to its internal and external dimensions. During the entire day give heed to your thoughts, words, and deeds, and sit down every evening to review the history of your behavior on that particular day. Proceed from hour to hour, from place to place, from one person to the next person with whom you have been in contact, from incident to incident as it occurred, and then consider your behavior in all these circumstances in view of each commandment. Identify the corruption of your nature as the fountain of

all these things, and consider all that would have proceeded from this fountain if opportunity and inclination had given occasion for this. Add to this the aforementioned qualifications which are required for every action, in order that you may become acquainted with yourself.

However, even that will not engender a truly perplexed, sensitive, and contrite frame, unless the Lord were to give you a view of His majesty, holiness, righteousness, and truth. He must cause you to see that sin is an act of denial, rejection, and contempt towards God, while simultaneously giving you an impression of the dreadfulness of its punishment. Only then will sin truly become a reality, and the sinner be perplexed. Only then will he need help and be driven to the Mediator, Christ. Behold, thus you are a horrendous and abominable monstrosity smothered in your sins.

Our Misery: A Reflection Upon the Punishment to Which We Are Subject

Secondly, you are miserable in view of being deserving of punishment . Proceed further to the consideration of the temporal and eternal punishments which are the consequences of sin. Contemplation upon the state in which you have come due to sin ought to make you shudder and tremble, considering that therefore you are not worthy to walk upon the face of the earth. It is a wonder that the earth still bears you and does not open its mouth to devour you alive. It is a wonder that fire does not come down from heaven to consume you with Sodom and Gomorrah and that the devil is not permitted to tear you to pieces and to drag your soul to hell. You are not worthy of inhaling air through your nostrils, of seeing the sun, and of having the canopy of heaven stretched out over you. You are not worthy of having a piece of bread to put in your mouth, nor a thread to cover your skin.

Lift up your eyes and think for a moment about God, the majestic, holy, and glorious God who is a terror to the sinner. Consider what David said regarding Him: “For Thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness: neither shall evil dwell with Thee. The foolish shall not stand in Thy sight: Thou hatest all workers of iniquity. Thou shalt destroy them that speak leasing: the LORD will abhor the bloody and deceitful man” (Ps. 5:4–6). Paul spoke likewise: “But unto them that . . . do not obey the truth . . . indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish [shall come] ⁴¹upon every soul of man that doeth evil” (Rom. 2:8–9). Hear the thundering declaration in Galatians 3:10, “Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written . . . to do them.” Consider also 2 Thessalonians 1:8, “In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Oh my unconverted fellowman who does not wish to be drawn and wooed by the goodness of God, may God once cause you to perceive what His wrath is, to which you are subject, in order that you may be saved with fear!

Let me present this in more detail to you, hoping that in some measure it may move you.

(1) Take note of God’s own expressions in this regard. “Thou, even Thou, art to be feared: and who may stand in Thy sight when once Thou art angry?” (Ps. 76:7); “Who ⁴¹ The words inside the brackets are printed in italics in the Statenvertaling. Since they clarify the meaning of the quote they have been included. knoweth the power of Thine anger? even according to Thy fear, so is Thy wrath” (Ps. 90:11); “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb. 10:31).

(2) Consider the anxiety of the saints when God hides His countenance from them and when He causes but a glimpse of His anger to be seen by them. David feared this and therefore prayed, “O LORD, rebuke me not in Thine anger, neither chasten me in Thy hot displeasure” (Ps. 6:1). Jeremiah could endure anything, but he feared the wrath of God, for he said, “Be not a terror unto me” (Jer. 17:17). How Job complained of this! “For the arrows of the Almighty are within me, the poison whereof drinketh up my spirit: the terrors of God do set themselves in array against me” (Job 6:4). Heman expressed his anxiety as follows, “Thy fierce wrath goeth over me; Thy terrors have cut me off” (Ps. 88:16).

(3) Observe and consider how the Lord Jesus, the Surety of the elect, became a curse, and how He endured all misery and anxiety. Consider how He was assaulted by the devil, was rejected, despised, and mocked of men, was condemned and put to death on the cross. Consider how the wrath of God pressed Him down and caused Him to be sorrowful unto death. He was engaged in a fierce battle, and was sorrowful and very heavy. He sweat an abundance of blood which fell in drops from His face to the earth; He crawled as a worm upon the earth. He prayed and mourned, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” Such was the heaviness of His task in atoning for the sins of His elect.

(4) If this does not move you, proceed to observe the dreadful pit of damnation, and listen to the gnashing of teeth, the weeping, the frightful shriek, “Woe, woe, woe,” the terror, and the violent raging of the conscience of the damned in the eternal fire. Consider that to all eternity they will never enjoy one beam of light, nor one quiet moment, but will eternally be overcome with inexpressible despair knowing they will never be delivered as well as be subject to an inexpressible perception of the wrath of God.

In all quietness you ought to meditate upon the state of damnation. First of all, what will it be to have a soul and body which cannot find fulfillment within itself and thus cannot be satisfied unless this fulfillment comes from elsewhere, which, however, will be lacking to all eternity. There will not be the least refreshment, neither will there be food, drink, light, sleep, nor companionship by which one could find some delight in conversation. On the contrary, there will be an infinite separation from God, angels, the godly, joy, and glory. At the present time one may be able to forget his unhappiness and sorrow by a variety of means and thus feel no sorrow concerning that of which he is deprived. Then, however, it will be unbearable when these various means are removed. What dreadful despair will this yield for the unfulfilled and sorrowing soul!

Secondly, consider how the soul, against its will, will continually be compelled to think upon all the benefits which it had received of God in this life as far as the body is concerned. He will also be compelled to think upon the means of grace received, and the sermons and ministers by which he was admonished and rebuked, exhorting him to repent, and indeed, constraining him to do so. The soul will think upon all divine conviction within the conscience, as well as the deliberate rejection, despising, opposition towards, and contradiction of all the means of grace, as well as towards those who with words and deeds convicted them.

Thirdly, consider how dreadful it will be when all committed abominations will continually come to mind, and when these, one by one, will be vividly recalled together with all the abominable circumstances attending each of them.

Fourthly, consider what it will be when the ungodly will blame God for not having converted them as others, and for not having ushered

them into heaven as others, but instead depriving them eternally of all grace. Consider what it will be when, in their wickedness, they will lash out at God with every imaginable blasphemy.

Fifthly, consider how dreadful and terrifying it will be when the eternal wrath of God will continually overwhelm the soul, causing it unbearable pain, and all the perfections of God will simultaneously manifest themselves against the soul. How dreadful and terrifying this will be! What eternal despair this will engender!

Behold, you who hear or read this, you have deserved all this. Perhaps many of you, due to your failure to repent and the hardness of your hearts, will experience this and have your portion in this lake which burns with sulfur and brimstone. Perhaps this will be your portion within a few days. Be alarmed, tremble, and repent, in order that you may escape the manifestation of this wrath.

Perhaps all of this may not even affect you. This one or that one may perhaps think that he is too strong mentally to be seriously disturbed by all these things. Perhaps such a person can rationally respond to all this and quiet his conscience. I assure you, however, that when God causes one's heart to tremble, he most certainly will become aware that a terrified conscience alone will cause him unbearable distress. Even a rustling leaf will cause him to tremble. Oh that you would quietly and intelligently consider and believe these things, applying all this to yourself if you are still unconverted—in order that your heart might be appalled by all this, as to whether it would please the Lord to grant you conversion!

Perhaps someone else, in response to the presentation of these matters, may think, “since God is gracious and merciful, I hope for better things. I hope that He will keep me from hell.” My response to this is that, first of all, mercy must have an object which is pitifully

miserable. You, however, are hatefully miserable, and there is nothing in you which would move God to be merciful. You are Lo-ruhamah: no more to have mercy (Hosea 1:6), hateful (Titus 3:3), “the generation of His wrath” (Jer. 7:29), to be loathed and not to be pitied by anyone (Ezek. 16:5), an abhorrence (Ps. 5:6), and a generation of vipers (Mat. 3:7). Who would have compassion upon an injured toad or snake? Man either continues to kill them or at least gets rid of them. In like fashion you are hateful and abominable, and therefore you are not to comfort yourself with the mercy of God. God is just and cannot allow any sin to go unpunished. God’s grace does not consist in permitting any sin to go unpunished. Grace is God’s ordination and sending forth of a Surety whom He has punished in the stead of His elect. It is grace that He, by means of the gospel, causes this Surety to be proclaimed and offered. It is grace that He bestows the gift of faith on someone, enabling him to receive this Surety. It is grace when He converts someone and sanctifies him. It is grace when He, by virtue of the merits of this Surety, leads

someone to eternal felicity in the way of sanctification. Therefore you who are not upon this way have no reason to comfort yourself with grace, for that is deceiving yourself to your eternal damnation. In addition to your hatefulness, God can also not tolerate you because you neither cease from sinning, nor from provoking, reviling, and despising Him continually. Furthermore, you also exalt yourself above God. By all this you demonstrate that you ignore God’s threatenings, and rather continue boldly in sin. It is as if you are saying, “God may do whatever He wishes, but I don’t care. I will live as I please, and I will refrain from or do whatever I wish.” In addition to this you show that you desire to be honored, feared, loved, obeyed and served by men—desiring that with all these deeds they would end in you. Do not you thus establish yourself as a god?

Therefore, abominable and intolerable creature, do not imagine that your misery will move God to be merciful.

Secondly, God's justice will not permit sin to go unpunished. God's majesty, which you have trampled under foot, His holiness, and His truth demand satisfaction by the bearing of punishment. Therefore the sinner can neither hope for grace, nor for mercy—and he will certainly find himself deceived in his hope—unless he has an interest in the Surety Jesus Christ. Therefore, oh man, be alarmed about your condition and be convicted of your abominable and damnable nature, for to be sensible of this is the initial manifestation of grace.

Our Misery: A Reflection upon our Impotency

Thirdly, you are miserable in view of your impotency . Your condition is that you are abominable, condemnable, and forsaken of God and all creatures. Come then, be a hero and save yourself if you can. This is, however, absolutely impossible, for your salvation requires the perfect satisfaction of God's justice by the bearing of all temporal and eternal punishments, and a perfect holiness. This the justice of God requires, for God can only justify a just man and can by no means clear the guilty. He cannot grant the right to eternal life to a man unless the conditions of the covenant, upon which eternal felicity was promised, have been fulfilled. And now, oh miserable one, what will you do? What can you give as a ransom for your soul? You cannot bring that which is eternal to a conclusion, neither by suffering punishment can you make full satisfaction and be acquitted as one who has satisfied the requirements of justice. You are not able

to deliver yourself from the pollution of your sinful state and adorn yourself with internal and external holiness which is both perfect and pure. Thus you cannot present yourself before God as pleasing in His sight, saying with boldness, “Here I am; enter into judgment with me and judge me according to Thy justice.” If only you may perceive this to some degree (I do not even mention the things which precede this), you must be convinced of your impotency and cry out, “Oh, wretch that I am! I cannot help myself, and I sink away in my misery. Where must I go? Woe unto me!”

Now consider all this together, and take some time to meditate on how completely abominable, condemnable, and hopeless your situation is. If you are unconverted, it may be a means to stir you up to seek and to ask, “Is there yet help? Is there no hope? Is there yet a way whereby I may be saved?” If you are then directed to Jesus Christ as the way, He will become precious, and you will earnestly seek to become a partaker of Him by faith. If you are converted, the contemplation upon the state of sin, no matter what it may have been for you prior to your conversion, will make and keep you humble; it will teach you to esteem Christ highly and to make use of Him continually. It will motivate you to glorify God, this being an expression of gratitude for sending His Son to deliver poor sinners through Him and to lead them to eternal felicity.