

The Purging of the Conscience from Dead Works to Serve the Living God

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"For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God." Hebrews 9:13, 14

The rites and ceremonies of the Levitical dispensation were exceedingly numerous, minute, complicated, and burdensome. Not to mention the sacrifices which were perpetually being offered, such as that of a lamb every morning and evening, and of the bullock and the goat on the great day of atonement, there were very many rites and ceremonies continually taking place for acts of ceremonial uncleanness. If you were to carefully examine what we read in Leviticus 15 and other parts of that book, and thus gather up the numerous circumstances by which ceremonial defilement was contracted, you would be surprised if you went on to calculate from those elements the number of persons who in the camp of Israel must have been at any one given time under a state of ceremonial pollution. Take, for instance, the single case of childbearing. A woman that bore a male child was unclean for thirty-three days; and if it were a female child for sixty-six days. Now what a vast number of women must have been in a state of ceremonial uncleanness at the same time in that amazing multitude, where there were more than half-a-million of grown up men, and probably most of them married, in the camp. Take another case: if a man died, all within his tent was defiled. A

friend could not close his eyes without defilement; the widow could not imprint a last kiss upon the pallid lips of her departed partner without defilement; a child could not touch the coffin or take the last farewell touch of the hand that it had so often grasped without defilement; and the same uncleanness attached itself to every one who bore him to the grave. Now, of that vast multitude, how many would be continually dying. A man could not take the bone of a dead animal in the street and throw it away or touch with his foot an unclean animal without defilement. All lepers were thrust out of the camp as unclean, and all suspected of the symptoms of that terrible disease were carefully shut up.

But I need not enter any further into these and similar circumstances of ceremonial defilement, which would but take up my time and draw away your attention from more important matter. What I have already said will be sufficient to show how exceedingly minute, laborious, and burdensome that dispensation must have been to those who were under it, and bound by strict injunctions to attend to all its directions, constituting it with all its requirements, as Peter said, a burden which neither they nor their fathers could bear.

And yet with all this, infinite wisdom and mercy were mixed. These Levitical rites and ceremonies were intended by God to produce certain special and permanent effects.

1. First, they *separated* the people effectually from their heathen neighbours; for the ceremonies and sacrifices of the Levitical law being restricted solely to the children of Israel, they were necessarily precluded from associating with all but those who were interested in them. Take, for instance, the great standing festival of the Passover. There was an express prohibition: "A foreigner and a hired servant shall not eat

thereof." And as the sacred rites and ceremonies of the law were restricted to the children of Israel, so were they prohibited in the most absolute manner from polluting themselves with the idolatrous rites of the surrounding nations.

2. But again, these rites and ceremonies taught them also the *holiness of God*, imprinting in visible characters upon their mind the purity and perfection of that great God with whom they had to do; for, besides the blood of the sacrifices, the numerous washings of the body and of the clothes which were requisite for the removal of ceremonial defilement would teach them the abhorrence which God had of all sin and uncleanness, and that nothing impure could live in his sight.

3. The ever-recurring sacrifices, the continual shedding of blood, and the sprinkling of it would also convince spiritual worshippers that there was a need of a *sacrifice of God's own providing* which should one day be offered, and of which the offerings of bulls and of goats were merely typical representations; and thus they instrumentally led the believing Israelite to look to the promised seed of the woman who should bruise the serpent's head—the Lamb of God who should in due time be revealed, the Messiah who should make atonement for sin by the offering of himself.

4. They taught also those who were spiritually enlightened the necessity of that *inward holiness*, without which no man can see the Lord, and that they needed to be cleansed by the Spirit's regeneration as well as washed in the atoning blood of the Lord the Lamb, to which these sacrifices pointed.

But I shall not this morning take up your time with entering at any further length into an explanation of the rites and

sacrifices of the Levitical dispensation, but come at once to our text, in which I think we may find these four leading features especially worthy of our attention and consideration.

I.—*First, the work which could be effected by the Levitical sacrifices and ceremonies.* They could confer upon the flesh a ceremonial sanctity; but that was all they could do: "the blood of bulls and of goats and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctified to the purifying of the flesh."

II.—*Secondly, the value and blessedness of the blood of Christ,* who is here declared to have "offered himself, through the eternal Spirit, without spot unto God."

III.—*Thirdly, the power and efficacy of that blood when applied.* It *purges the conscience from dead works.*

IV.—*And, lastly, the fruit and effect of the conscience being thus purged from dead works, it is enabled "to serve the living God."*

I.—There is no doubt that the carnal worshippers under the Law rested in the outward sacrifice. Like our Pharisees and legalists, they were satisfied with the external form. When the sacrifice was completed their conscience found rest; when the ceremony had been gone through whereby they were restored to a state of ceremonial cleanness from their condition of ceremonial defilement, in that they rested as the chief, the only requisite to please and serve God. They did not look beyond the mere blood of the bull or the goat as shed and sprinkled, nor did they consider anything necessary or desirable beyond the application of the water in which the ashes of the red heifer were contained to remove their ceremonial defilement.

i. But as I have touched upon these points before I do not wish now to dwell upon them more than is absolutely needful for the full explanation of our subject. The apostle, then, here seems to class under two general heads the rites and ceremonies of the Levitical law. By the blood of bulls and of goats he seems to point our attention to those solemn transactions which took place on the great day of atonement, when the high priest offered a bullock for his sins and the sins of his house, and took the blood within the veil and sprinkled it seven times on and before the mercy seat, carrying at the same time incense beaten small, with coals from off the burning altar, and thus filled the holy of holies with the sweet smell of incense. When he had offered the bullock as a sacrifice for the sins of himself and his own house, he killed the goat, and he did with that blood as he had done with the blood of the bullock—took it within the veil and sprinkled it upon and before the mercy seat. He took also the blood and purified the brazen altar, and by that blood the sins of the people were typically put away and atonement was made. But it was accepted, not because there was anything in the blood of the bull or of the goat which could take away sin, for, as the apostle well and wisely argues, "the blood of bulls and of goats could not take away sin," but God had respect to the blood thus shed because it pointed to that great sacrifice which was to be offered in due time upon Calvary.

ii. But we also find mention made in our text of "the ashes of a heifer sprinkling the unclean." In order to explain this, I shall have to call your attention to a peculiar ceremony of which we have a full account in Numbers 19, where we find the Lord thus speaking: "This is the ordinance of the law which the Lord hath commanded, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, that they bring thee a red heifer without spot, wherein is no blemish, and upon which never came

yoke; and ye shall give her unto Eleazer the priest, that he may bring her forth without the camp, and one shall slay her before his face." (Numb. 19:2, 3.) I need not take up your time by dwelling at any great length upon this peculiar rite; but I must touch for a few moments upon some of its leading features, as they have such a strong typical meaning. Observe then:—

1. It was to be a "*red* heifer, and that *without spot* or blemish, whereon never came yoke." Red is the colour of guilt. "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." (Isa. 1:18.) And yet though the heifer was red, yet was she without spot or blemish. So the guilt of our sin was laid upon Christ, and yet he was without spot, absolutely pure and holy. Yoke had never come upon her; so was there no constraint on Christ to suffer, bleed, and die; but he offered himself willingly through the eternal Spirit as a sacrifice for us.

2. Secondly, she was *taken without the camp* and there slain. So the blessed Lord was crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem, for "he suffered without the gate," and we are bidden to "go forth unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach."

3. Thirdly, it *was not the priest* who slew her, but someone for him before his face. So was it with the Lord. He did not put himself to death, though he freely laid down his precious life. As Peter charged the men of Israel: "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain." (Acts 2:23.)

4. The blood of the heifer was *sprinkled* by the priest seven

times, a perfect number, before the tabernacle of the congregation. So is the whole church perfectly purified by the sprinkling of the blood of Christ.

5. The whole heifer was to be *burnt* in sight of the priest. So did our blessed Lord offer up his whole body and soul in the fire of love kindled in him by the eternal Spirit.

6. *Cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet* were to be cast into the midst of the burning of the heifer, all which were used, under the law, to purify the unclean and to sanctify and dedicate men and things to sacred uses. So in the one offering of Christ there is contained everything which can cleanse, consecrate, and sanctify.

Now, the ashes of the heifer were to be carefully gathered up and laid up without the camp in a clean place, that they might be kept for the congregation of the children of Israel as a water of separation, a purification for sin. I have observed before that whoever touched a dead body was ceremonially unclean. Now so stringent was the law, that unless the man thus defiled was sprinkled with the water of separation, that is, with running water into which the ashes of the burnt heifer were put, he was to be cut off from Israel.

But now let us see what, according to the apostle's testimony, the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling the unclean could do: "They sanctified to the purifying of the flesh." This is all they could do, and this only by virtue of God's institution. There was nothing in the blood of the goat or of the bull which could in itself put away sin; nor would such sacrifices have been accepted in the sight of God had they not been according to his own institution. The blood shed in sacrifice was designed to be a typical representation of the blood of the Lamb; and as such it had

its value both in the sight of God and in the sight of the spiritual worshipper. In a similar manner, the water of purification was a standing type of the sanctifying influences and operations of the Spirit of God upon the heart. Besides which, as permanent institutions, they kept before the eyes of the people the two grand gospel doctrines of atonement by blood and purification by water. But as regards themselves, they could only ceremonially sanctify and purify the flesh from ceremonial defilement, without pardoning sin or sanctifying the sinner. Strong as types, they were utter weakness in communicating spiritual blessings.

II.—But let us now pass on to our next point, where the apostle contrasts with these weak and beggarly elements, the blood of bulls and goats, and the ashes of the heifer sprinkling the unclean, that *precious blood of Christ* who, through the eternal Spirit, offered himself without spot to God.

i. Observe the force and strength of his language: "How much more." It is usual with the apostle, in drawing his comparisons between the law and the gospel, between the sign and the thing signified, to use some such expression, in order to show the superiority of the one over the other. Thus he says, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?" (2:3.) "This man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses" (3:3); "Of how much more sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy" (10:29); "If they escaped not who refused that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape." (12:25.) This mode of speech is intended to magnify the gospel above the law, and to show how great is the strength of the one as compared with the weakness of the other.

But now observe the peculiar point in which the law was so

weak. It is, as he speaks just above, of the gifts and sacrifices offered therein. They could not make him that did the service perfect as pertaining to the *conscience*. Now this is a point demanding our utmost attention. The blood of bulls and of goats only typically and representatively made atonement for sin. It could not actually put it away, and therefore could not take the weight and guilt of it off a burdened conscience. So with the water of purification. If a man had become ceremonially unclean by touching a dead body, the sprinkling upon him of the water in which the ashes were put could restore him to his ceremonial cleanness; but it could never cleanse his conscience or purify his heart. The apostle names, in another place, two striking circumstances attending the sacrifices which manifested their inherent imperfection. One was their *constant repetition*. "They were offered year by year continually; and therefore could not make the comers thereunto perfect;" that is, they could not relieve their consciences. He therefore adds: "For then would they not have ceased to be offered, because that the worshipers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins? But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year." (Heb. 10:2, 3.) Now contrast this imperfection with the sacrifice of Christ according to the will of God: "By the which will we are sacrificed through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." (Heb. 10:10.) The offering of the body of Jesus Christ was once for all. It was full, final, and complete. It therefore needed no repetition; for to do a thing twice implies a failure in the doing of it once, which needs to be amended by a second effort. The other mark of imperfection was that the priest stood when he offered the sacrifice; and his retaining year after year the same standing posture, proved that there was an inherent inefficacy in the sacrifice thus offered. Now contrasting with this standing posture of the Levitical priest the sitting down of Jesus at the right hand

of God, he says, "But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; from henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified. (Heb. 10:12, 13, 14.)

I wish to draw your attention to these points, to show the fulness of the one perfect sacrifice of Christ, that your conscience may find peace and rest; for this is the point in which everything fails but the atoning blood of the Lord the Lamb. This therefore was the main point in which the blood of bulls and of goats, with the whole train of Levitical rites and ceremonies, failed of old. Where there was life in the worshipper's heart, there was a guilty conscience which they could not purge. Carnal, ceremonial worshippers could rest in the sacrifice, but the spiritual worshipper felt in his own bosom its inherent deficiency. Now the apostle, contrasting with the inefficacy of these legal ceremonies and these external sacrifices the value, efficacy, and blessedness of the blood of Christ, says, "How much more." It is as if he would say, "Blood and water of old could do the work appointed for them. They could sanctify to the purifying of the flesh, but could do no more. But look, O, look at the mightier work which has been effected by the atoning blood of the Lamb. If they had a certain value, and that value was given them by God; if they had their place in the old legal dispensation, and were not only types and figures of better things to come, but could also remove ceremonial filth, and defilement, and restore the worshipper to the camp of Israel and to the privileges of the sanctuary, how much more under the gospel dispensation, in the day in which we now live, shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge and cleanse your consciences to whom it is revealed and upon which it is sprinkled, to serve the living God."

ii. There is something to my mind exceedingly blessed and beautiful in the way in which the apostle here speaks of Christ "offering himself through the eternal Spirit without spot to God. Let me therefore seek as far as I can to open it up in its spiritual meaning.

1. First, observe how it seems to bring before our eyes the *sacred humanity* of our gracious Lord in conjunction with his eternal Deity, and to represent him as through the eternal Spirit offering himself without spot unto God. "He offered *himself*;" all that he had, all that he had taken, and all that he possessed in his pure humanity—his holy body, his holy soul, his holy affections, his holy desires, his holy prayers, his holy obedience, all that he was as pure and without spot. His body was without spot, his soul without spot, his obedience without spot, his affections, his prayers, his desires, himself in a word as the Lamb of God without spot or blemish. "He offered himself;" if I may use the expression, the whole Christ offered himself, Christ as God and Christ as man, for we cannot separate one from the other. It is true that the offering was of his pure humanity only—of his body and soul; but as it was the act of his whole Person both natures concurred in it, this made it effective. He therefore offered his humanity in conjunction with his Deity, the latter giving it infinite efficacy and value. He did not offer himself as God, for Deity cannot be sacrificed or offered—that implying blood-shedding and death—nor simply as man, for that in itself would have been ineffectual; but he offered himself as the God Man, the Immanuel, God with us.

And he offered himself *to God*. To understand this, let us bear in mind a few circumstances which may throw light on the expression of the apostle. 1. God is here viewed as the Law Giver, the supreme Governor and righteous Judge of all, sitting on his throne of judgment; and as such, two things

are ascribed and belong to him: 1, the denunciation of his holy Law: "The soul that sinneth it shall die." "Cursed be every one who continueth not in all things written in the law to do them." 2. An absolute refusal of every way of satisfaction that could be made by the creature or by the blood of bulls and of goats.

Now unto God as such, this holy, righteous Judge, this God of purity and holiness, the Son of God, his own eternal, well beloved Son, offers himself in sacrifice that he might put away sin by his own blood, having taken upon him the sins of all the elect, that he might make atonement for them. His holy humanity was the offering; but the way of its being offered was by the shedding of his blood. It was so with the type—the legal sacrifice; the animal slain was the sacrifice, but the shedding of the blood was that by which atonement was made, for "the life of the flesh is in the blood, and it is the blood that maketh atonement for the soul." (Levit. 17:11.)

iii. But the apostle tells us that it was "through the eternal Spirit" that he so offered himself. This we may understand in two senses.

1. It may, first, represent the hand, so to speak, which the eternal Spirit had in this solemn transaction. We must always bear in mind that the Holy Ghost is a Person in the sacred Godhead; and that he was present at all transactions which were connected with the mysteries of redeeming love. Thus he was one of the parties to the everlasting covenant ordered in all things and sure; it was under his sacred power and overshadowing that the human nature of our Lord was conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary; he rested upon him and baptised him with his own divine power and influence when he descended in bodily shape as a dove; and

as our Lord came up out of Jordan he filled him with every grace and every gift that was needful for his mission as Prophet, Priest, and King. In the last great act, therefore, of our Redeemer when he was upon the cross, the Holy Ghost was there. As the Father in heaven was looking down with eyes of infinite complacency upon his dear Son as doing his will, as putting away sin, and yet was pleased there to bruise him and hide his face from him, so the Holy Ghost was present at that solemn scene, upholding the gracious Redeemer in his obedience unto death, in his sufferings and agonies, in his cries and sighs. He was also present there to sanctify the offering, to consecrate it and fill it with all holy fragrance, and so to perfume it with his influence and grace as to make it especially acceptable to God. I do not like to make use of figures on this subject, lest I should tarnish and mar its solemn sacredness and holy beauty, yet a figure may convey in some measure how additional fragrance was imparted to our Lord's sufferings and sacrifice through the eternal Spirit. Here is a rose upon its stem, beautiful in shape and bright in colour; but does not its exquisite fragrance add much to its beauty, sweetness, and acceptability? So our gracious Lord when he was upon the cross offered himself without spot to God, his pure humanity upon the altar of his eternal Deity; and there being no spot nor blemish in him, and it being the voluntary offering of his only begotten Son, the sacrifice was acceptable to God. But as he was filled with every grace and gift of the Holy Ghost; as that blessed Comforter wrought in him that patience, resignation, submission, and obedience even unto death which were so conspicuous in our suffering Lord, there was a raising up of an additional perfume from this offering and sacrifice, which rendered it unspeakably acceptable in the eyes of our heavenly Father and righteous Judge. Thus God was well pleased with his obedience; and it was "a sacrifice unto him of a sweet smelling savour." It satisfied all the demands of

his justice, and fulfilled every claim of his righteous law. It judged and destroyed Satan and his power, overthrew his kingdom, defeated his unjust and usurped dominion, spoiled him of his armour, and led captivity captive; and, as the blessed fruit and result of the whole, it put away sin, and reconciled and saved the Church of God.

Now these are very deep and mysterious subjects. I seem sometimes to shrink from speaking of them, lest I darken counsel by words without knowledge. And yet I have seen such blessedness in them that though I speak with stammering lips I would not keep back from the family of God anything that may seem more to recommend to them the Lord Jesus Christ, more blessedly to exalt his worthy name, and hold him up to the conscience of all who fear God with greater acceptance, power, and suitability.

2. But the expression, "through the eternal Spirit," may admit of another meaning. It may signify the divine nature of our blessed Lord. "God is a Spirit," and therefore the divine nature of Jesus as being eternal may be called his own eternal Spirit. Whether this be the meaning of the words or not, it is equally true that the Deity of Christ was the altar on which he offered his pure humanity, and in that sense he may well be said to have "offered himself through the eternal Spirit." I much prefer, however, myself the explanation which I have given as referring the words to the Holy Spirit, who, though the expression I believe is not elsewhere found, may well be called "the eternal Spirit," as a Person subsisting from all eternity in the Godhead.

III.—Now it is the blood of this precious Christ, this holy Lamb of God who offered himself without spot unto God, which is *"to purge the conscience from dead works to serve the living God."*

i. You will observe that it is the *conscience* which is to be purged and purified by atoning blood. I must therefore direct your attention to the meaning of the expression. The word "conscience" is used in the Scriptures of the New Testament seemingly in different, and at first sight what may seem almost contradictory senses. Thus we read sometimes of a "good conscience." "Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck." "Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly." "I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day." "The answer of a good conscience toward God." But again, we read of an "evil conscience:" "Having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience." So we read sometimes of a "pure conscience:" "Holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience." Then we read of a "defiled conscience:" "Their conscience being weak is defiled." And sometimes, as in the passage thus quoted, of "a weak conscience." Thus at first sight there would seem to be some inconsistency in all these various meanings; and yet rightly explained there will be found no inconsistency or contradiction in them. The word conscience seems to mean that part of the soul, if I may use the expression, which apprehends sin and especially has to deal with it as a burden, as something producing guilt, defiling and polluting it in the sight of a holy God. When, then, the conscience is lying under the guilt and burden of sin it is an "evil," or, as it is usually called, a guilty conscience; not because in itself it is evil, but it is termed so as polluted and defiled with evil, and as feeling and testifying against it. But when the conscience is purged or purified by the application of atoning blood; when it is washed, so to speak, from its defilements in that precious fountain which is opened for all sin and uncleanness; and when the Holy Ghost bears his testimony to it and in it as thus effectually cleansed, it is then a pure conscience, a clean conscience, a

good conscience. The conscience in itself is the same principle of the soul, the same witness for God in the breast; but it is spoken of as evil when defiled with the guilt of sin, and spoken of as pure and clean, when by the removal of guilt it is washed and cleansed, and, I may add, brought into harmony with the word and will of God as revealed in the gospel of his dear Son. For an evil conscience is not only evil as loaded with the guilt and filth of sin, but it is evil also as usually too much inclined to self-justification, or else rebellious, refractory, self-willed, and indisposed to submit to the judgment of God, or acquiesce with the voice of his word either as condemning or absolving. It cannot fully accept either punishment or pardon; writhes under the Law and yet rises up in rebellion against it; hears the gospel but cannot believe it; longs for mercy but cannot find it. For being cleansed and purged by atoning blood, it has not in it the Spirit's healing voice or comforting witness, and is therefore restless, discontented, unsubmitive, and ever casting up, like a troubled sea, mire and dirt. Like an instrument out of tune, it ever gives forth a jarring note; or like one with a sickly constitution, every thing disagrees with it, troubles it, burdens and disorders it. It is the heaviest of all burdens to bear, the greatest of all trials to feel, the gloomiest of all companions to live with, and the bitterest of all recollections to reflect upon. If it look backward, it sees misery there in the remembrance of the past, and if it look forward, it sees misery there in the dread of the future. It mars every earthly comfort, spreads a gloom over the face of all nature, darkens the very sun at noon day, and increases with tenfold density the shades of night. It is the source of thousands of the bitterest complaints which the mouth of man has ever uttered, and its language, for the most part, like that of Ezekiel's roll, is "lamentations, and mourning, and woe."

Now the Holy Spirit by the apostle speaks to such as are

suffering under the bitter pangs of this evil, this guilty, this defiled conscience, and tells them if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, could sanctify to the purifying of the flesh, how much more should the blood of Christ, who, through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge their conscience from dead works; implying that the conscience needed purging or purifying, and that the blood of Christ as sprinkled and applied could and would do it for them. But what is the force of his argument here? It is this. According to the will of God and by his express institution and appointment, the legal sacrifices and rites carried with them an available and effectual sanctification of the flesh. When the blood of the sacrifice was shed, when the water of purification was sprinkled, the worshipper was ceremonially clean. He could now come into the camp; he could now present himself before the tabernacle. He was no longer unclean; what God had instituted for his cleansing had removed all his defilement. Ceremonially God and man had now pronounced him clean. Once more he could go into his tabernacles and worship at his footstool: once more behold the beauty of the Lord and inquire in his temple. So Christ having put away sin by the sacrifice of himself according to the will of God, and by his express institution and appointment, and by that same will we being sanctified through the offering of his body once for all, are reconciled and brought near unto God. Sin being put away there is no longer any bar between God and us; for "in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace." As then this is revealed and made known to the conscience by the power of God, and it becomes thus sprinkled by the application of atoning blood, it is cleansed from its defilement, its burden of sin and guilt, and what the apostle here calls "dead works," or all those works and all those workings which, as sins, are as if polluted by the touch of

death.

Now do we not know, do we not feel that besides being purged, as Peter speaks, from our old sins, (2 Pet. 1:9), our conscience wants continual purging? The word "purge," I need scarcely explain, is the old English term now obsolete or used in one sense only, meaning to purify or cleanse. It is not so much then the sins we committed in the days of ignorance, sins of youth and unregeneracy, which were mercifully pardoned and blotted out when we first believed in the Son of God; but the sins committed since we knew the Lord, the sins of backsliding, of daily contracting, the sins that every one who has a living conscience sensibly feels he is guilty of well nigh every hour,—in the wandering eye, the roving mind, the foolish heart, the indifference, coldness, and deadness in the service of God; the rebellion, ingratitude, worldliness, carnality, unbelief, infidelity, pride, and self-seeking, with all the slips and falls which each mourning heart recollects and each guilty conscience testifies against. This is the evil conscience, the guilty conscience which needs to be continually purged by the blood of sprinkling, appeased by that voice which speaketh better things than the blood of Abel, that the load of sin being taken from it and its guilt removed, and we may stand before God with a good conscience, and having a sweet assurance of our interest in Christ, rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

But how many of the dear family of God are troubled nearly all their days with a guilty conscience; and generally speaking, the more tender their conscience the more they feel the burden of guilt. There is such a thing as a hardened conscience, what the Scripture calls seared with a hot iron. This is a conscience which, as if lying under the thick hard crust of an impenetrable scab, is proof against every touch. But where the conscience is tender and alive in the fear of

God, guilt is very soon contracted; and when contracted it lies as a load which cannot be thrown off, for there it remains till taken away. It is this continually fresh contracted guilt which causes so much dejection on the part of the family of God, tries their mind and casts them down. Let them walk with the uttermost tenderness and circumspection, yet through the entanglements produced by the snares of sin and Satan, the workings of corruption in their carnal mind, the constant ooziings up of a heart deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, they feel their conscience to be an evil conscience, under which they mourn and sigh, being burdened. They confess their sins and seek forgiveness of them; but until they get an application of the atoning blood, a manifestation of the pardoning love of God, and a sweet sense of reconciliation through the finished work of the Son of God experimentally enjoyed within, their conscience gets no real ease nor peace. Now the apostle regards the peculiar state and case of those who are thus tried and exercised, and says to them, "Look to those who were ceremonially unclean under the law. Was there not power in the blood of bulls and goats as far as it went, and was there not power in the ashes of the heifer as far as it went to sprinkle the unclean and to sanctify and purify their flesh? Now," he says, "if these ordinances had a certain value as instituted and appointed of God, how much more shall the blood of Christ, of which these were mere shadowy, though visible representations, do a much greater work. They could only purify the flesh, but this purifies the conscience; they only took away ceremonial uncleanness, but this puts for ever away all that sin, filth, and guilt which defile you in the sight of God; this can bring you into his immediate presence, with a conscience clean in his sight. This can cleanse you from all your dead works to serve a living God with all holy obedience, as well as worship him in spirit and in truth."

ii. But the course of our subject now brings us to show what the conscience is *purged from*: "*dead works*."

What are we to understand by this expression? It occurs also in a previous chapter of this epistle: "Not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works." (Heb. 6:1.) By comparing, then, the two passages we may perhaps arrive at its proper meaning. Repentance is repentance of sin, and therefore dead works would mean those sins of which we repent and from which we turn away. But in the passage now before us there seems some reference to the purification of the flesh by the water of separation. You will recollect that this water was specially used in the case of those who had been defiled by the dead. There is an allusion therefore, here to the dead bodies under the law and the ceremonial uncleanness produced by contact with them. Now as those who were thus defiled by these works with the dead were separated from God and his people, and could not be restored to communion with them but by the sprinkling of the ashes of the heifer upon them, so unless men are purged from the defilement and pollution of sin by the blood of Christ and its application to their conscience, they, as separated from God and his people, must eternally perish. By "dead works," therefore, we must understand sins with all the guilt and defilement attached to them; and they are called "dead works" for several reasons besides that which I have already assigned as peculiarly connected with the passage now before us. 1. First, then, they are called "dead" as a principle of spiritual death, and as performed by men dead in sin or dead in a profession; 2, they are called dead works, as dead in themselves, and therefore useless to obtaining life or justification, being the fruit of trees, which Jude calls "twice dead, plucked up by the roots;" and 3, thirdly, they are termed "dead," as deserving of death, and tending and hastening thereto; 4, besides which they are also a dead load

upon a living conscience, not only weighing it down as if with the pressure of a dead corpse, what the Scriptures calls "a body of death," but polluting it with all the defilement and uncleanness produced by such close contact with it.

Viewed in this light, all the works which a man may do before he experimentally knows the grace of God and the blood of atonement are dead works. He may work hard and long, and by his strenuous exertions work himself out of breath; but when he has done all that he can do in his own strength, wisdom, and righteousness, it is all but a dead work. His prayers are dead prayers, his services are dead services, his readings are dead readings, his duties are dead duties. Thus all that he does in the name of God, and as he thinks for the honour of God, are but dead works, no more accepted before God than the dead carcass from the uncleanness of which the defiled Israelite under the law had to be cleansed. Now as light and life are communicated to our souls, our conscience gets loaded with dead works; and as these dead works are not merely a load and burden under which the conscience groans, but as there is defilement also in them, and for the reason that I have already named, they become doubly burdensome; for there will always be in these dead works not only inherent imperfection, but actual sin mingled with them. Thus our works, our best works, what I may call our religious works, are not only dead in themselves, as the more twitchings and gaspings of a death-struck nature, but they are so polluted by the dark and turbid stream of sin ever running over and through them, that they defile the conscience with guilt. It thus has to bear not only a heavy burden but a guilty burden, a body of sin as well as a body of death. This makes the trial so keen. We have many heavy burdens to carry, such as a sickly body, trying circumstances, or an afflicted family which may cause much suffering, but do not bring with them sin and guilt; but dead

works lying upon the conscience gall with guilt as well as load with pressure. Have you not tried sometimes to get relief from this burden and weight of guilt, and perhaps only added to it by loading it with fresh dead works?

But perhaps there are other causes for your guilty burden. Some particular act of backsliding may lie hard and heavy upon your conscience, some slip or fall which you unawares have been betrayed into, of which the mournful remembrance haunts you well nigh night and day. You go to bed with it, and get up with it; it makes you hang your head with shame before God; and you scarcely dare venture among God's people lest they read your sin, marked upon your forehead. It has not been, perhaps, any outward sin, no reproach has been produced by it upon the cause, but it is some internally contracted guilt which makes you hang your head with shame before the people of God, as if they all knew your crime. Thus you are haunted night and day with this sin, and would give a thousand worlds, if you had them, never to have fallen into it; yet you feel that all you can do to remove it from your conscience are but dead works, which can never take away the guilt of that sin, or indeed of any other from off your burdened mind. But what is the fruit and effect of this teaching in your soul? Is it not that the blood of Christ, applied by the Holy Ghost, brought with a divine power and received and embraced by faith, can alone purge and appease the guilty conscience, and that, in this sense, it is the one thing needful? Now the Lord often, if not usually, enlightens the eyes of his people's understanding to see and recognise the sufficiency and suitability of the atoning blood of his dear Son before it is thus effectually applied. What then does the eye of faith thus spiritually enlightened see? It sees the blessedness and efficacy of that precious blood, as Abraham beheld the mount of deliverance, the Jehovah-jireh, afar off; it sees the gracious Lord offering himself without

spot unto God; it sees the value of the sacrifice in the value of the Sacrificer; the Deity of our gracious Lord in connection with his pure, suffering humanity. Is not this the reason why the blood of the Lamb has such efficacy; why it is such precious blood? Is it not because every drop has Deity stamped upon it? Now when the soul thus sees, though as yet afar off, what this blood is, what it can do, and how all sin is washed away and cast behind God's back by the virtue of that one offering by which Christ hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified, it casts itself, so to speak, under the shelter of that blood, and thus becomes bound by the cords of faith and hope to the horns of the altar. (Psa. 118:27.) But when the Holy Spirit goes on to manifest and reveal it in a more full, personal, and experimental way to the soul, then the conscience is purged from these dead works with all their weight and guilt; and resting wholly and solely on the atoning blood of the Lord the Lamb, it clearly sees and feels that all works rendered to God by a guilty conscience, everything done to recommend itself to his favour by the deeds of the law, and by any or everything which springs out of nature in its best or highest form, are neither more nor less than dead works which cannot please a living God. How gladly therefore does it now throw off all this load of dead works, as Joshua, the high priest, threw off his filthy garments when the Lord caused his iniquity to pass from him. (Zech. 3:4.) As then they are removed by atoning blood, and the conscience is thus purged from them, it now becomes a good conscience, a pure conscience, a conscience in which the blessed Spirit bears his testimony, and which moves in harmony with the will and word of God, as revealed in the gospel of his dear Son.

IV.—But what follows as the *fruit and effect* of this purged conscience, which brings us to our fourth and last point? It is "*to serve the living God.*"

i. If we are to serve the living God agreeably with his will and acceptably in his sight, it must be in newness of spirit, not in the oldness of the letter; that is, not in legal obedience, which is not only defective and imperfect, but always attended with hard and heavy bondage. True service is gospel service, the obedience of faith which flows from the application of atoning blood, the effect of which is not only to purge but to heal. "Who healeth all thy diseases." "I am the Lord that healeth thee." And where there is healing there is renewing. "So that thy youth is renewed like the eagle's." It thus becomes a purged, a healed, and a renewed conscience—purged by blood, healed by pardoning love, and renewed by the Spirit's work and witness—the whole being the spiritual workmanship of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

I intimated that the conscience was called "an evil conscience," not only on account of the guilt of sin lying upon it, and thus defiling it with evil, but as inherently vitiated by sin, so as to be disabled from rightly performing its office, as recurring to self-justification as well as being partial, inconsistent, and rebellious. When, then, the conscience is purged, it is made a "good conscience," for now, truth and righteousness, simplicity and godly sincerity, tender reverence and filial fear take up their abode in it. Nothing makes a man so sincere as revealed mercy. David, therefore, after describing the blessedness of the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, as forgiving his transgressions and covering his sin, adds, "And in whose spirit there is no guile," as if there were guile before. (Psa. 32:1, 2.)

But with all this, we can only know that he is the living God by some discovery of his life to our soul, for he that cometh to God, must believe that he is; and we can only worship and serve him as the living God when guilt, doubt, fear, and bondage are removed from off the conscience by the blood of

sprinkling. As long as the weight and guilt of dead works remain upon the conscience, there is a serving him with dread under the chains of the law, under the lashes of Moses, that pitiless and inexorable taskmaster. There is not that free, spiritual service rendered by a willing child as to a kind and loving Father, which makes it acceptable in his sight. The apostle, therefore, beseeches us not by the terrors but "by the mercies of God, to present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is our reasonable service," that is, the worship and obedience of our enlightened understanding. (Rom. 12:1.) There is no delight in God under guilt; there is no pleasure in reading his word, in coming to his footstool, or believing in him as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our religion, for the most part, is one of heaviness and bondage, a weariness to the flesh. But when faith receives the atonement, when sin is purged by the application of atoning blood, and all these dead works are removed with their burdensome guilt, and God is seen to be a living God, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, a God of grace, mercy, goodness, and love, who lives in his love and in his goodness—then there is a serving him with the free, acceptable, willing obedience of a child, a desire to know his will and do it, a tender reverence of his glory, a holy longing to walk before him in all humility and devotedness, with many earnest wishes to keep his precepts and adhere to his word. The law never can do this, or produce such effects. A man may sin on the very brink of hell; as I have said sometimes, may sin one moment and jump into hell the next; may sin in desperation; his very despair, bondage, and guilt only egging him on to sin the more fully and wilfully. The more he sees of the majesty of God, of his holiness, and what he is in a broken law, the more his heart may be filled with rebellion and enmity against that God whom he only knows as a consuming fire. But when guilt disappears under the blood of sprinkling, and

these dreadful feelings are removed by a believing view of the spotless Lamb of God, when there is an apprehending by the hand of faith of the precious blood which cleanseth from all sin, when the dark clouds of sin and guilt are dispersed, a measure of peace felt in the soul, and liberty in approaching the throne of grace, then there is a holy delight in serving God, in walking in his precepts, in obeying his commandments, in seeking to know his will and do it. Then, there is a holy pleasure in living to his honour and praise, and walking before him in humility, simplicity, reverence, and godly fear.

Thus, the grand point in all true religion is to be brought by the blessed Spirit into that happy spot where we can serve the living God free from that guilt, bondage, darkness, doubt, and fear which often possess our mind, and are the worst enemies of our soul's peace.

ii. But though they are such enemies to all true peace and happiness, yet are they mercifully overruled for our spiritual good; to convince us from whence our help must come, to strip us thoroughly of all creature help and hope, and bring us to the spot where the Lord meets the soul in mercy, sheds abroad his love, and brings near a precious Christ. We have no reason to thank bondage, guilt, and the law, still less sin and Satan, for any work they have done which God has overruled for our good. And yet without some experience of these dead works and the bondage and guilt produced by them, we could not know what it was to have our conscience purged by the blood of sprinkling to serve the living God. There are reasons, therefore, and wise reasons on the part of God, why his children should be thus vexed and plagued. It is true it is not the revealed will of God that his children should spend so many of their days in darkness, doubt, and fear. He has given us a glorious gospel; he has set before us in Jesus

everything for our comfort and relief; he has promised to send his holy Spirit to testify of Christ, and has filled his word with promises and invitations suited to every case. And yet his secret will and purpose are that we should be thus exercised and tried, and walk in this path of darkness and desolation, that we might value more the precious liberty of the gospel, know more of what Christ is and what he has done to save us from the depths of the fall, be more deeply indebted to the riches of free and sovereign grace, and come more personally into the blessedness of gospel mercies as made known to our soul by a divine power.

It is on this point chiefly that the people of God differ from mere doctrinal professors. They hold the same doctrines as we hold; they believe, at least nominally and professedly, in the blood of Christ as cleansing from all sin; they own the perfection of his finished work; and they acknowledge all those blessings which are spoken of in the gospel; but without having any personal application or inward enjoyment of them, any spiritual experience of them, or walking in them as their chief delight and happiness. Now what is, humanly speaking, the reason of this? Is it not because they are not, as Asaph says, "in trouble as other men, neither are they plagued like other men?" They are not exercised by a burden of guilt, by a body of sin and death; and, therefore, there is no real value put by them upon the blood of sprinkling, no real faith in Christ, no good hope through grace in his mercy, nor real spiritual love to his Person. They have the word; but "the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power;" they have the doctrines, but not the power of the doctrines. But the family of God, being plunged often deeply into guilt and bondage and sharply exercised by the inward conflict they have to pass through, are brought to this point:—

"Good doctrines can do me no good,

While floating in the brain."

"I must have," says the living soul, "realities. What is the blood of Christ to me, though I see it in the word and know it cleanses from all sin, unless I know and feel its power? It is when applied to me that it does me good. I want the application, I want the revelation, I want the manifestation, I want to see my interest and read my title clear, to have all my doubts and fears cast behind my back, rejoice in hope of the glory of God, and walk in sweet liberty in the enjoyment of his presence and love." Thus, bondage prepares us for liberty; guilt teaches us experimentally the need of atoning blood to put it away; and the very exercises, trials, and temptations through which the soul is called to pass, are instruments to lead us into an apprehension of the only divine realities which God has provided to speak pardon and peace to the soul. We have no reason to thank these things for the good they do us, viewed in themselves. Like our slips and falls, they may be overruled for our good; but no thanks to anything we have done wrong whereby God is glorified, or which is overruled for our spiritual benefit.

But what a mercy it is to have a conscience in any measure purged from dead works to serve the living God; to feel any free access to his gracious Majesty, any happy liberty in walking before him, any deliverance from doubt and fear, any removal of those exercises which try the mind and often bring heavy burdens upon the soul. Still, after all our wanderings, we must ever come to the same spot; after all our departings and backslidings, still again and again we must be brought to the same place to get the guilt removed, the mercy proclaimed, and the peace revealed. For is not this the blessedness that the blood of Christ cleanseth from *all* sin? Having obtained eternal redemption for us, his blood will never lose its efficacy, but will ever purge the conscience as long as the conscience of any burdened member of his

mystical body remains to be purged, till he presents all his ransomed saints faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy.