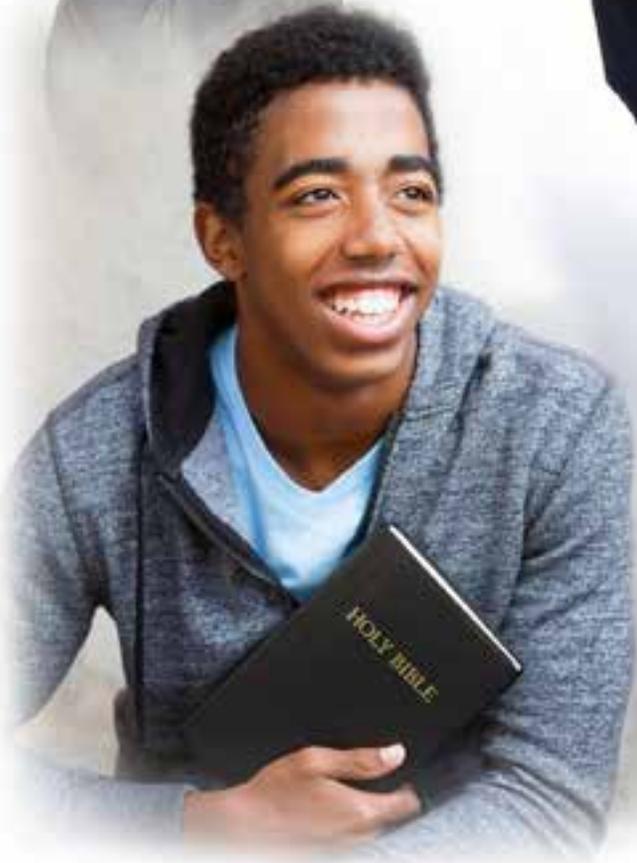
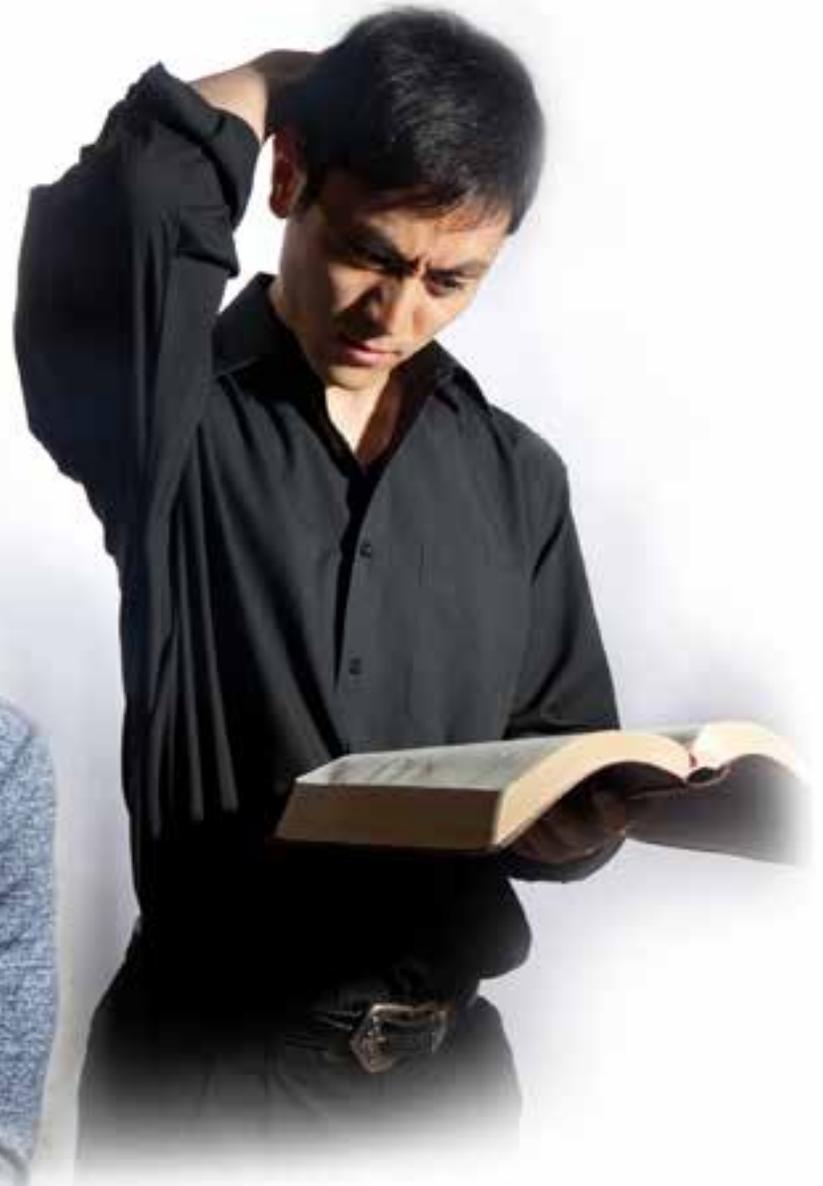
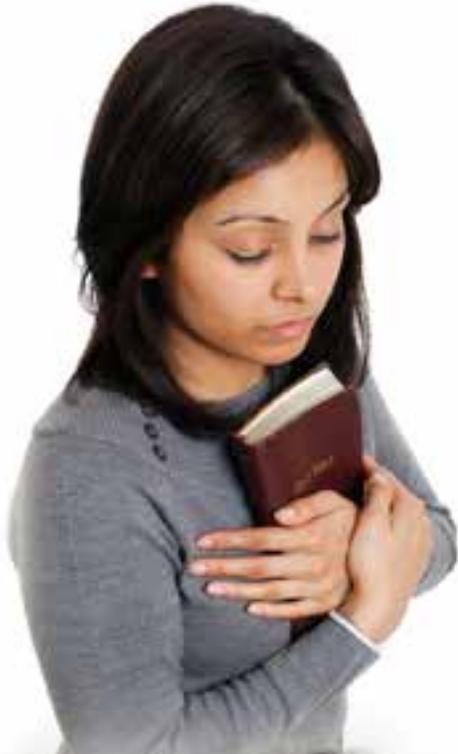


# AM I REALLY A CHRISTIAN?



THOMAS BOSTON (1676-1732)

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## *Eight Doubts Answered*

Selections from *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State* – modernized

### Contents

1. Not knowing exact time of conversion.....	2
2. Struggle with sin.....	3
3. Heart in more turmoil.....	3
4. Love for the things of this world .....	4
5. Fear of hypocrisy.....	6
6. Comparison to others.....	7
7. Temptations.....	7
8. Seemingly unusual trials.....	9

This booklet contains selected sections from *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State*, modernized for easier understanding by today's reader. Jeffrey T. Riddle, Pastor of Christ Reformed Baptist Church in Charlottesville, Virginia, provided the abstraction and modernization.

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# AM I REALLY A CHRISTIAN?

## *Eight Doubts Answered*

True Christians sometimes have serious doubts.<sup>1</sup> Here are eight different kinds of doubts they sometimes have.

### **1. Not knowing exact time of conversion**

I doubt I am really born again because I do not know the exact time of my conversion.<sup>2</sup> Neither can I trace the steps that led me to becoming a Christian.

*Answer:* Though it is desirable to be able to describe the beginning of the Lord's work in your life and the gradual growth you've enjoyed, this is not necessary to prove that you truly are a Christian. We must remember that the work of the Holy Spirit is a mystery. In the *Gospel of John*, we read about Jesus healing a blind man. This man simply said, "One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see" (Joh 9:25). When we see a flame, we know there is a fire, even if we don't know how it began.

Even so, we can know we are Christians, even if we do not know how or when it all happened. Do you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? Have you repented<sup>3</sup> from your sins? Has there been a change in your soul? Does your mind have light? Do you want to obey God in everything for the sake of Jesus, Who died on the cross? Do you love other believers? Do you flee from the evils in this wicked world? If you answer "yes" to such questions, then you do not need to trouble yourself with this doubt.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This booklet treats a limited range of issues impacting believers' assurance of salvation. If the reader finds issues not discussed that are troubling him, do not despair—God's Word is sufficient to help. The book of First John is an excellent place to start: it was given by God for this purpose (see 1Jo 5:13). It explains the nature, character, and behavior of true Christians. They are born of God's Spirit (1Jo 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4). Therefore, they believe in Jesus Christ (1Jo 2:1-2; 2:21-28; 4:1-4, 9-19; 5:1, 4-13, 20). They are convinced of their sinfulness (1Jo 1:8-10). They obey God's Word (1Jo 2:1-6, 29; 3:1-10, 24; 5:2-3). They love other Christians (1Jo 2:9-11; 3:10-19, 23; 4:7-13, 20-21; 5:1-3). They don't love this ungodly world (1Jo 2:15-17). Prayerfully read the entire book, earnestly seeking God for understanding.

<sup>2</sup> See FGBs 202, *The New Birth*, and 195, *Conversion*, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

<sup>3</sup> Repentance to life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sins and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, does with grief and hatred of his sin turn from it to God, with full purpose to strive after new obedience. (*Spurgeon's Catechism* Q. 70) See FGB 203, *Repentance*, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

<sup>4</sup> There is a fine line between reasonable assurance and appropriate examining of oneself (2Co 13:5). One may be changed (2Pe 2:20) or illuminated (Heb 6:4-9) to some degree and yet not be a true Christian.

## 2. Struggle with sin

If I am really a Christian, a new creature in Christ, why do I continue to struggle with sin?

*Answer:* We certainly do not want to lay down pillows so that hypocrites<sup>5</sup> can rest easy with indulging their sin and making God's grace a slave to their lusts. On the other hand, we need to remember that "all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). Sin may prevail at times even over the children of God. Are you groaning under the weight of sin and the corruption of your nature? Are you disgusted with yourself for the sins of your heart and life? Are you striving to put your lusts to death, fleeing daily to the blood of Christ for pardon and looking to His Spirit for sanctification?<sup>6</sup> Though you might say with Psalm 65:3, "Iniquities prevail against me," remember that this verse ends, "As for transgressions, thou shalt purge them away."

The new creature in Christ is like a man who does not live in a house alone: an ill-tempered neighbor lives in the same house with him. His name is "remaining corruption." These two constantly struggle with each other for control: "The flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh" (Gal 5:17). Sometimes old "corruption" prevails and makes the child of God a captive to the law of sin (Rom 7:23). Do not let his occasional victories make you conclude that you are not a child of God! Instead, let it humble you. Let it make you more watchful. Let it make you thirst even more intensely for Jesus Christ, His blood and Spirit. The principle of grace within you, the new birth in Christ, will seek the destruction of the very sin that so often defeats you.

## 3. Heart in more turmoil

I find that my heart has been in more turmoil after I became a Christian than it was before. Is this consistent with someone who is supposed to have been changed by Christ?

*Answer:* There are indeed dreadful cases of persons who appear to have become Christians, but who later renounce the faith and fall into gross and open immorality. It seems that the devil returns to their hearts with seven spirits worse than himself (cf. Mat 12:45). Such persons are in an incredibly dangerous spiritual state. They risk sinning against the Holy Spirit. They must repent, before it is too late.

This is not necessarily the case, however, with you. Corruption can be stirred up in a Christian even more strongly than it was before he became a Christian. It might

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<sup>5</sup> See FGB 193, *Hypocrisy*.

<sup>6</sup> **sanctification** – Sanctification is the work of God's Spirit whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God and are enabled more and more to die to sin and live to righteousness (*Spurgeon's Catechism*, Q. 34). See also FGB 215, *Sanctification*; both available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

appear to you that all the forces of hell have been raised to try to recapture you as an escaped fugitive. Such stirrings may indeed occur in those truly changed by Christ. When restraining grace comes up against the corruption in a new believer, it is no wonder that corruption tries to fight back, “warring against the law of my mind” (Rom 7:23). Sin will resist all the harder when it knows this new principle is seeking to cast it out. When the sun shines through a window, we see all the dust in the house that we did not see before. So when the light of grace shines in our lives, we see the corruption inside us that we had not noticed before. Sin is not quite dead in the believer’s soul. It is dying a lingering death. It is being crucified. No wonder it begins to fight so hard—it knows it is about to die, so it struggles to live!

Besides all this, the Christian might be faced with more numerous and stronger temptations after his conversion. Satan has to work harder to try to bring back one who has escaped, than he does to guard one who is still a captive. The author of Hebrews says, “After ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions” (Heb 10:32). He then adds, “Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward” (v. 35). Remember, God’s grace is sufficient for you, and the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly. Remember how Pharaoh and the Egyptians had the Israelites cornered at the Red Sea, but then God intervened<sup>7</sup> and overthrew them (Exo 14)?

Do not let this doubt destroy the foundation of your trust. Empty yourself of doubting. Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might, and you will be victorious.

#### **4. Love for the things of this world**

I sometimes feel that my love for the things of this world is greater than my love for God. How then can I call Him Father? Indeed, it sometimes seems that the affections I used to feel for God are gone. I fear that all the love I ever had for the Lord has only been like a fit and a flash. I fear I am a hypocrite.

*Answer:* It cannot be denied that an *overriding* love of the world is a certain mark of an unsaved man. “If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him (1Jo 2:15).

Still, the most active affections are not always the strongest. A little brook sometimes makes more noise than a mighty river. The strength of our affections can only be measured by the firmness and steadfastness of the root. Suppose a person meets with a friend who has been out of the country. He has not seen this friend for a long time. The expression of his affections for that friend might, in the moment, be stronger than his feelings for his own wife and children. Would we conclude that he

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<sup>7</sup> **intervened** – came between so as to change a course of events.

loves his friend more than them? Surely not! Even so, though a Christian might in the moment be moved with love for something in this world, this does not mean that he loves it more than God. Love to God is always more firmly rooted in a believer's heart than is any worldly enjoyment.

If there is ever a competition between love for God and love for the world, one of the loves will win (Mat 6:24). Do you want to understand your spiritual state? Look into your own heart and lay the two loves in the balance; see which outweighs the other. Ask yourself in the sight of God whether you would part with Christ for the sake of anyone or anything in the world. If you honestly answer that, at His command, you would cast away what is dearest to you in the world for Christ, then you have no reason to think you love the world more than God. On the other hand, if you love someone or something in the world more than God, then you are not a believer. Consider the following two texts:

He that loveth father or mother more than me,  
is not worthy of me. (Mat 10:37)

If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother...he cannot be my disciple. (Luk 14:26)

From these texts, we can infer that one who is ready to part even with his father and mother for the Lord's sake loves them less than Him.

In addition, consider that there are two types of love for Christ:

*First*, there is an emotional love for Him. It is like a dart in the heart. It creates a holy love-sickness in the soul. It longs to enjoy the beloved. It is like the longing described in Song of Songs 5:8: "I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if ye find my beloved, that ye tell him, that I am sick of love." Or it refers to a fullness of love, as in Song of Songs 2:5: "Stay with me flagons, comfort me with apples: for I am sick of love." Such strong feelings are usually found in young converts, who "shall sing there, as in the days of [their] youth" (Hos 2:15).

They are sometimes so on fire for the Lord that they are even ready to criticize godly persons who have long been believers, just because they do not share the same strong feelings. They mistakenly think that there is far less religion in the world than there actually is. When the froth settles below the brim in his own cup, such a man finds in himself the same things he once criticized in others. This should humble him. It should make him know his daily need for the blood of Christ, for forgiveness, and for the Spirit of Christ for sanctification. So he grows downward in humiliation, self-loathing, and self-denial.

*Second*, there is a rational<sup>8</sup> love for Christ. This love is shown by a serious concern for God's authority and His commands. When one has this love, he wants to

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<sup>8</sup> **rational** – having the mental power of reason.

please God by obeying him even if he does not feel strong emotions. “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments” (1Jo 5:3).

The *emotional* love for God does not always continue with you. If you lack it, you have no need to consider yourself a hypocrite—as long as you maintain a *rational* love for Christ. A faithful and loving wife has no need to question her love for her husband just because she does not have the same emotional experience of love for him as when they first married.

## 5. Fear of hypocrisy

Every time I begin to think I can see the marks of grace in me and that I am truly saved, I hear about some hypocrite or apostate,<sup>9</sup> and I am shaken. Fear comes over me like a storm. Am I like this kind of person?

*Answer:* These sorts of things ought to stir us up. We ought to examine ourselves seriously and impartially. Still, we should not always be in a state of suspense about our spiritual state. You can see the outside of a hypocrite. You can see his “spiritual” activity and emotions, but you cannot see inside him. You do not know his heart.

You can only form a judgment of another person based on what you see on the outside. You would do well to judge others with charity (i.e., “thinketh no evil,” 1Co 13:5). Again, you cannot know the secret springs of their actions. Rather than judging others, you ought to look at your own heart. You are the person you can judge with more clarity.<sup>10</sup> You must look at yourself as no one else in the world can do. You can see things in yourself that you simply cannot see in others.

A hypocrite’s religion may seem far greater than the religion of a sincere believer. Remember that what is great in the eyes of men is often of little value in God’s sight (1Sa 16:7). I would rather groan with Paul (Rom 8:6) than shed false tears with Esau, prophesy with Balaam, or have the temporary joy of the shallow-ground hearers (Mat 13:20). There is a fire that will judge every man’s work to see “what sort it is” (1Co 3:13). If God does not judge by outward appearance, why do you? Without special revelation, you cannot know the sincerity of another man’s faith. But you can know the sincerity of your own faith, without any special revelation. This is why Peter exhorted the saints to “give diligence to make your calling and election sure” (2Pe 1:10). Therefore, the actions of hypocrites and apostates should not disturb you. The important thing is to seriously examine your own spiritual condition.

Here are two ways that the weakest saints excel the “best” hypocrites:

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<sup>9</sup> **apostate** – one who has abandoned the faith he had previously professed. See FGB 205, *Apostasy*, available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

<sup>10</sup> While it is true that we know ourselves better than others do (1Co 2:11), yet our self-knowledge is flawed (Jer 17:9).

*First*, the saints deny themselves. They renounce all confidence in themselves and their works. They venture their souls completely on God's salvation through Christ. They are "poor in spirit" (Mat 5:3). They are blessed because they are not offended by Christ (Mat 11:6). In Philippians 3:3, Paul wrote, "We are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh."

*Second*, the saints have a real hatred of sin. They are willing to part with every lust, without exception, and to obey all the Lord's commands. "Then shall I not be ashamed, when I have respect unto all thy commandments" (Psa 119:6).

Test yourself by these standards.

## **6. Comparison to others**

My life falls so far short of the standards of the great saints of the Bible and of the excellent Christians that I know personally. When I look at them, I can hardly stand to look at myself in comparison. How can I claim even to be in the same family with such saints?

*Answer:* We can see a measure of grace and holiness in this life that we should have, but cannot ever reach. This should humble us. It should also make us press all the more vigorously toward the mark. The devil wants weak Christians to be tortured by comparing themselves to strong Christians (2Co 10:12). To give in to this temptation would be like a child doubting his relationship to his father because he is not the same height as his older brother. It is irrational!<sup>11</sup> There are saints of various sizes in Christ's family. Some are fathers; some are young men; and some are little children (1Jo 2:13-14).

## **7. Temptations**

I have never read in the Bible or known about a true child of God who was as tempted or as without God as I am. Since I do not know of any Christian who has ever been in my condition, I can only conclude that I must not be a believer.

*Answer:* This doubt comes from ignorance both of the Bible and of the actual experience of Christians. Those who have this doubt should try speaking with a mature Christian friend or a godly minister. Doing this has brought peace to some when they realize that their case is not exceptional and that many Christians have had the same struggle.

The Bible provides many examples of Christians suffering with horrible temptations. The devil tempted Job to blaspheme (Job 1:11-12; 2:3-9). Asaph was tempted to

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<sup>11</sup> See Mark 4:20 for varying degrees of fruitfulness that exist among true Christians.

think religion was vain and to throw it off (Psa 73:13). Christ Himself was tempted to cast Himself down from a pinnacle of the temple and to worship the devil (Mat 4:5-9). Many Christians have not only been attacked with temptations, but they even have been overcome by them and fallen into gross sin for a time. Peter denied Christ, and cursed and swore that he did not know Him (Mar 14:71). Some Christians were compelled to blaspheme under persecution by Paul, before he was converted (Act 26:10-11).

Many Christians can bear witness to their own sad personal experiences in this area. They have suffered very great temptations, which have astonished their spirits, made their bodies tremble, and made them sick to their stomachs. Satan's fiery darts can cause great damage. It takes great diligence to extinguish them or to block them with the shield of faith (Eph 6:16). Sometimes Satan throws so many fire-balls at our house that all we can do is constantly run back and forth to extinguish them. We must remember, however, that merely to be tempted is not a sin. It is sin only when we consent to the temptation (Jam 1:14-15). If one is tempted to sin but does not consent to the temptation, he can no more be accused of that sin than a chaste man can be charged with fathering a child out of wedlock.

Suppose you go to a mature Christian friend or minister and share your problem, but they say they have never known anyone exactly in your condition. You still should not think that your case is exceptional. You certainly should not give up hope! Even a mature Christian or godly minister cannot know every difficulty a child of God might face. Some have had struggles known only to God and their own consciences. Though Scripture provides directions for every condition a believer might be in (1Co 10:13), it does not exhaustively list every struggle a Christian might face. Though you cannot find your specific case in the Bible, bring your case to the Bible, and you will find a remedy. Do not worry with trying to find out if anyone has ever been in your condition; strive instead to apply *Christ* to your condition. Christ has a remedy for all diseases of the soul. Even if you found a true Christian who was tempted in the same way you are, what would that prove? Your situations would not be exactly the same in every way. Consider the human face. In some ways, every human face is the same. Each has the same features. At the same time, every face is also different and can be distinguished from all others.

*Conclusion:* If you see the marks of biblical regeneration in your life, you should conclude that you are in the state of grace. This is true even if you are struggling with temptations that seem unique to you (which, by the way, is impossible).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> While particular circumstances of our temptations may be unique, we are assured that, in principle, they are "common to man" (see 1Co 10:13) and that Christ was tempted at the same points and triumphed (see Heb 4:15)!

## 8. Seemingly unusual trials

The struggles I have are strange or unusual. I doubt that a child of God has ever faced the kind of providential trials I have faced.

*Answer:* Much of what was previously said (see the seventh doubt) applies here also. Holy Job was assaulted with all sorts of temptations, but he rejected them and held fast. The apostle Peter says that Christians may be tempted: “Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you” (1Pe 4:12).

Sometimes we travel on paths where we can see the footprints of neither man nor beast. We cannot conclude from this, however, that no one has ever gone this way before us. Though you cannot see the footsteps of the flock in the way of your affliction, you must not conclude that you are the first to ever walk that road.

But what if you were the first to walk that way? In theory, some saint or other may be first in drinking from each bitter cup. But even then, if such a thing were possible, who are we to question the providential circumstances God has given us? “Thy way is in the sea, and thy path in the great waters, and thy footsteps are not known” (Psa 77:19). If the Lord should carry you to heaven by some remote road, so to speak, you would have no reason to complain. We must learn to allow proper latitude<sup>13</sup> for God’s sovereignty. Do your duty. Do not let any difficulty you face hide from you the fact that you are in a state of grace.<sup>14</sup>



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<sup>13</sup> **latitude** – freedom from narrow restrictions.

<sup>14</sup> [God] lays this down for a rule that the love and hatred of God are not to be measured and judged of by men’s outward condition. If prosperity were a certain sign of God’s love, and affliction of His hatred, then it might justly be an offence to us to see the wicked and godly fare alike. But the matter is not so: *No man knows either love or hatred by all that is before him* in this world, by those things that are the objects of sense. (Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1048)