**Lesson 9**

**The Holy Spirit Convicting and Comforting**

Arthur Pink begins this section on **the Spirit convicting** with a solemn warning:

“Though man in his natural estate is spiritually dead, entirely destitute of any spark of true holiness, he is still a rational being possessing a conscience by which he is capable of perceiving the difference between good and evil. He can even be made to realize his true condition as a transgressor of the holy Law of God. This sight and sense of sin, when aroused from moral stupor, under the common operations of the Holy Spirit, is termed “conviction of sin.” And there can be no doubt that the views and feelings of men may be very clear and strong even while they are in an unregenerate state.”

“But there is nothing whatever in the kind of conviction of sin just mentioned that has any tendency to change the heart or make it better. No matter how clear or how strong such convictions are, there is nothing in them which approximates to those that the Spirit produces in those whom He quickens. Such convictions may be accompanied by the most alarming apprehensions of danger, the imagination may be filled with the most frightful images of terror, and hell may seem almost uncovered to their terrified view. Very often, under the sound of the faithful preaching of eternal punishment, some are aroused from their lethargy and feelings of the utmost terror are awakened in their souls, while there is no real spiritual conviction of the exceeding sinfulness of sin.”

“Solemn it is to realize that there are now in hell multitudes of men and women who on earth were visited with deep conviction of sin, whose awakened conscience made them conscious of their rebellion against their Maker, who were made to feel something of the reality of the everlasting burnings, and the justice of God meting out such punishment to those who spurn His authority and trample His laws beneath their feet. How solemn it is to realize that many of those who experienced such convictions were aroused to flee from the wrath to come and became very zealous and diligent in seeking to escape the torments of hell, and who under the instinct of self-preservation took up with “religion” as offering the desired means of escape. And how unspeakably solemn to realize that many of those poor souls fell victim to men who spoke “smooth things,” assuring them that they were the objects of God’s love, and that nothing more was needed than to “receive Christ as your personal Savior.” How unspeakably solemn, we say, that such souls look to Christ merely as a fire-escape, who never, from a supernatural work of the Spirit in their hearts, surrendered to Christ as Lord.”

**The conviction of sin by the Holy Spirit serves several purposes.**

1. For the **unregenerate man who is elect of God**, conviction of his utter sinfulness is an early first step in the process of salvation. Unless there is a conviction of one’s true unworthiness and seeing the sinfulness of sin, there can be no repentance.

2. For the **unregenerate man who is not elect of God**, the Holy Spirit uses the conviction of sin as one of the means by which men are restrained from exercising their depravity to an even greater degree. Without the conviction of sin, men will become even more evil than they already are.

3. For the **regenerate man** who has already been saved by God, the conviction of sin causes us to see sin the way God sees sin and causes us to repent and strive to live more godly lives.

**Characteristics of the Spirit’s True Conviction**

“The “honest” heart will say, “If it is possible for an unregenerate soul to experience the convictions of sin you have depicted above, if one who is dead in trespasses and sins may, nevertheless, have a vivid and frightful anticipation of the wrath to come, and engage in such sincere and earnest endeavors to escape from the same, then how am I to ascertain whether *my* convictions have been of a different kind from theirs?”

“In His particular saving work of conviction, **the Holy Spirit occupies the soul more with *sin itself* than with punishment**. This is an exercise of the mind to which fallen men are exceedingly averse: they had rather meditate on almost anything than upon their own wickedness.”

“The Spirit occupies the quickened and enlightened soul with the exceeding *sinfulness of sin.* He unmasks its evil character and shows that all our self-pleasing and self- gratification are but a species of sinfulness, of enmity against Him—against His Person, His attributes, His government. The Spirit makes the convicted soul feel how grievously he has turned his back upon God (Jer 32:33), lifted up his heel against Him and trampled His laws underfoot.”

**In other words**, conviction of sin is not for the purpose of instilling fear of hell in men. The purpose for the Spirit convicting us of sin is to instill in men the knowledge that sin is rebellion against God. And after having come face to face with our sinfulness we have a greater love for Christ. “The Spirit brings before the heart of the convicted one the *character and claims of God.* Sin is now viewed in the light of the divine countenance, and he is made to feel what an evil and bitter thing it is to sin against God.”

“The pure light of God, shining in the conscience over against vile darkness, horrifies the soul. The convicted one both sees and feels that God is holy and that he is completely unholy; that God is good and he is vile; that there is a most awful disparity between Him and us. He is made to feelingly cry, “How can such a corrupt wretch like I ever stand before such a holy God, whose majesty I have so often slighted?” Now it is that the soul is made to realize how it has treated God with the basest ingratitude, abusing His goodness, perverting His mercies, scorning his best Friend.”

**What the believer’s conviction of sin looks like**

“There is a very real and radical difference between that conviction of sin which many of the unregenerate experience under the common operations of the Spirit, and that conviction of sin which follows His work of quickening and enlightening the hearts of God’s elect.”

* In the case of the believer the conscience is occupied more with sin itself than with its punishment; with the real nature of sin as rebellion against God; with its exceeding sinfulness as enmity against God; with the multitude of sins, every action being polluted; with the character and claims of God as showing the awful disparity there is between Him and us.
* Where the soul has not only been made to perceive, but also to feel—to have a heart-horror and anguish over the same—there is good reason to believe that the work of divine grace has been begun in the soul.

**The Means of the Spirit’s Convicting: Use of the Law**

Arthur Pink states, “the great instrument which the Holy Spirit uses in this special work of conviction is the Law, for that is the one rule which God has given whereby we are to judge of the moral good or evil of actions, and conviction is nothing more or less than the formal impression of sin by the Law upon the conscience.”

**Objection:** But some would object to this statement by Pink, citing Romans 6:14, ***For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.***

**Reply:** This objection comes from a misunderstanding of the purpose of the Law. The Law was never intended to save anyone. The purpose of the Law is to show man that standard of holiness, to which no man can attain. So while we are no longer under the punishment of God for breaking His Law, His Law is still good and holy.

* “***By the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:20)***: it is the design of all laws to impress the understanding with what is to be done, and consequently with man’s deviation from them. And so absolutely necessary is the law for this discernment, the Apostle Paul declared, ***“I had not known sin but by the law” (Rom 7:7)***—its real nature as opposition to God; its inveterate enmity against Him; its unsuspected lustings within. ***“The law entered that sin might abound” (Rom 5:20)***, by deepening and widening the conviction of sin upon the conscience.
* Pink describes the reaction of a truly Spirit-filled heart: “Here is the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 30:6, ***The Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart.*** The blessed Spirit uses the sharp knife of the Law, pierces the conscience, and convicts of the exceeding sinfulness of sin. By this divine operation, the hardness of the heart is removed, and the iniquity of it laid open, the plague and corruption of it discovered—and all is made naked to the soul’s view. The sinner is now exceedingly pained over his rebellions against God, is broken down before Him, is filled with shame, and loathes and abhors himself.”

**What is the relationship between conviction of sin and salvation?**

We have learned in this chapter that **there can be no salvation without conviction of sin, but conviction of sin does not ensure that a person is saved**. In other words, simply admitting that you are a sinner is not the same as hating your sin and seeing it as God sees it. As Pink states, “of ourselves we could never be truly convicted of our wretched state, for ***“the heart is deceitful above all things,”*** and God alone can search it (Jer 17:9).” Conviction of sin is a human response to a knowledge of the truth. But knowledge of the truth is not the same as faith. We must be led by the Holy Spirit to see ourselves with self-loathing so that we see ourselves as God sees us. And in so doing we see the need for a Savior, without whom it is impossible to see God.

**The Spirit Comforting**

Having first examined the subject of “the Spirit convicting,” we now move to the subject of “the Spirit comforting.” Arthur Pink begins this section with three powerful statements that link the convicting ministry of the Spirit with His comforting ministry:

* First, “where there is no self-condemnation and humiliation there can be no saving faith in the Lord Jesus.”
* Second, “it is the burdensome sense of sin that prepares the soul for the Savior.”
* Third, “without conviction, there can be no contrition and compunction: he that sees not his wickedness and guilt never mourns for it; he that feels not his filthiness and wretchedness never bewails it.”

As we examine this subject you may be surprised by the methods employed by the Holy Spirit in comforting His own. The Spirit’s ways of comforting are certainly not like man’s ways.

Arthur Pink states that there are **5 steps in the process of the Spirit drawing souls to Christ**.

1. He **regenerates** the dead soul, bringing them from death to life.

2. He **illumines** the new believer, shining into our minds.

3. He applies the light of God into our consciences by effectual **conviction**

4. He **wounds and breaks our hearts** as we see the corruption that sin has wrought in us

5. He **moves our will to embrace Christ** in the way of faith for salvation.

Arthur Pink adds to this 5-step process the following statement: “while these steps are more distinct in some more than others, **it is in this order that the work of the Holy Spirit is carried on, ordinarily, in all**. If Pink is correct, **why must the Spirit work in us in this order of events?**

Here in this sequence of events we see two important points.

* **First**, note that it is God who regenerates and illumines us. This is in direct contradiction to the Arminian view that man saves and illumines himself by the power of his own will. Pink correctly states that it is only God who regenerates and illumines the new heart.
* **Second,** note that **a knowledge and conviction of** **the “bad news” precedes an embrace of the good news**. It is only when we see ourselves as God sees us and are broken by this knowledge that we are then prepared to hear and embrace the good news of salvation in Christ. Without being broken by the bad news we see no value or need of the good news.
* Furthermore, not only must we see our corruption, but **the wounds that we endure must be of the sort that breaks our will to resist.** It is only when our prideful hearts are fully broken that we are ready to receive the comfort of the Holy Spirit to embrace Christ. And only the Spirit knows when that has occurred. He knows us better than we know ourselves and only He knows when our prideful spirit has truly been broken.

**Weaned from the world**

One of the things the Spirit does in God’s children is to wean us from the world. “By His mighty work of illumination and conviction, with the humiliation that is wrought in the soul, the Spirit effectually weans the heart forever from the comfort, pleasure, satisfaction, or joy that is to be found in sin. Once the soul is made to feel that sin is the greatest of all evils, it sours for him the things of the world, he has lost his deep relish for them forever, and nothing is now so desirable unto him as the favor of God.” **The way the Spirit weans us from the world is by taking us “into the wilderness, to a place that is barren or devoid of all comforts and delights; and then He speaks comfort to us.”**

When Pink says that the Spirit brings us “into the wilderness, to a place that is barren or devoid of all comforts and delights,” what does he mean? **Where is this “wilderness”?**

* The term “wilderness” means “an uncultivated, uninhabited, or inhospitable region.” Pink’s use of this term is to mean “an inhospitable region” is very applicable. In the sense that Pink uses it, the “wilderness” that the Spirit takes us to is not a physical place, but a spiritual place.
* The wilderness that Pink refers to here can be in the midst of a great crowd of people. It can be in your own home, in the presence of your family. The wilderness Pink speaks of is a place where your spirit experiences great loss, fear, conviction and loneliness.
* The experience of being in a spiritual wilderness may cause you to feel more alone than you have ever been, all while being in the presence of friends and family. **The wilderness of spirit is the realization of your destitute state without Jesus Christ.**

What are the words of comfort the Spirit speaks to us when we are in “the wilderness” that causes us to hate the world?

While the world entices our flesh with the passing pleasures of sin, they only lead to the way of death. Pink uses the example of a condemned man who is led through a beautiful garden on his way to his execution.

* “What pleasure would be derived from the beautiful flowers as a murderer was led through a lovely garden to the place of his execution? No Spirit-convicted sinner can find contentment in anything till he is assured of the favor of Him Whom he has so grievously offended.”
* It is only when we come to know that we are condemned men without Christ that we see and understand the attractions of the world are only designed by our adversary to distract us from obedience to God.

**The nature of the Spirit’s comforting in suffering**

Pink then cites Hosea 2:6-14 as he goes on to explain the process by which the Spirit “speaks comfort to us.” Pink cites Hosea 2:6-14 in laying out the 4 steps in which the Spirit offers “comforting promise” to God’s children.

* In the book of Hosea we learn that God commands the prophet Hosea to take a harlot for his wife. In obedience to God’s command Hosea marries Gomer. And though she bears Hosea children, Gomer continues in her harlotry. God’s purpose is to use the unfaithfulness of Gomer as an example of how God’s own wife, Israel, has played the harlot. It is because of Israel’s unfaithfulness to Him that His judgment has come upon Israel. God reveals what He will do to His unfaithful wife Hosea chapter 2.

***Hosea 2:6-14— 6 Therefore, behold, I will hedge up her way with thorns, and I will build a wall against her so that she cannot find her paths. 7 She will pursue her lovers, but she will not overtake them; and she will seek them, but will not find them. Then she will say, 'I will go back to my first husband, for it was better for me then than now!' 8 For she does not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the new wine and the oil, and lavished on her silver and gold, which they used for Baal.***

***9 Therefore, I will take back My grain at harvest time and My new wine in its season. I will also take away My wool and My flax given to cover her nakedness. 10 And then I will uncover her lewdness in the sight of her lovers, and no one will rescue her out of My hand. 11 I will also put an end to all her gaiety, her feasts, her new moons, her sabbaths and all her festal assemblies. 12 I will destroy her vines and fig trees, of which she said, 'These are my wages which my lovers have given me.' And I will make them a forest, and the beasts of the field will devour them. 13 I will punish her for the days of the Baals when she used to offer sacrifices to them and adorn herself with her earrings and jewelry, and follow her lovers, so that she forgot Me," declares the LORD.***

***14 Therefore, behold, I will allure her, bring her into the wilderness and speak kindly to her.***

From this passage Pink points out that just as God takes Israel into the wilderness, so He also takes His children into the wilderness in four steps:

**Step 1**, God hedges up the sinner’s way with “thorns” (Hos 2:6), piercing our conscience with the sharp arrows of conviction.

***Hosea 2:6— 6 Therefore, behold, I will hedge up her way with thorns, and I will build a wall against her so that she cannot find her paths.***

* **What is it that a hedge of thorns does?** A hedge of thorns was used to prevent animals from either escaping their appointed field or to prevent animals from entering. Either way, it was a barrier to prevent an undesired action by animals.
* In the same way the Holy Spirit hedges us in the directions we can go . . . blocking the path. Often the result of blocking a path is to create a hardship or painful situation. In preventing sinners from pursuing their favorite sins, the Spirit pierces our conscience with sharp arrows of conviction.
* Joseph Benson— “When they meet with disappointments it is in mercy, and they are *chastened of the Lord,* that they *may not be condemned* with the world.”
* Adam Clarke— “in spite of all your attachment to your idols, you shall find that they can give you neither bread, nor water, nor wool, nor flax, nor oil, nor drink. And ye shall be brought into such circumstances, that the pursuit of your expensive idolatry shall be impossible.

**Step 2**, God effectually battles all our attempts to drown our sorrows and find satisfaction again in our former “lovers,” or favorite sins. (v. 7).”

***Hosea 2:7— She will pursue her lovers, but she will not overtake them; and she will seek them, but will not find them.  Then she will say, 'I will go back to my first husband, for it was better for me then than now!***

* Distress at first increases our zeal in idolatry (we sin all the more), but it soon brings us to see that the sin no longer yields the pleasure it once did. The failure to reach or find the lovers, who are sought with zeal (in an intensive sense, to pursue eagerly), denotes the failure to secure what is sought from them. Sin no longer has the same appear or desired effect.

**Step 3**, God causes us to discover our spiritual nakedness, and He makes all our mirth to cease (vv. 10-11).

***Hosea 2:10-11— 10 And then I will uncover her lewdness in the sight of her lovers, and no one will rescue her out of My hand. 11 I will also put an end to all her gaiety, her feasts, her new moons, her sabbaths and all her festal assemblies.***

* Albert Barnes— “the folly of sin is veiled amid outward prosperity, and people think themselves, and are thought, wise and honorable and in good repute, and are centers of attraction and leaders of society, so long as they prosper; as it is said, “***so long as you do well for yourself men will speak well of you***” (Psalm 49:18). But as soon as God withdraws those outward gifts, the mask drops off, and people, being no longer dazzled, despise the sinner, while they go on to hug the sin.
* Keil & Delitzsch— “The intent with our sin being uncovered is not so that the world shall be obliged to look at it, without being able to avoid it, but **so that we shall become even to them an object of abhorrence**, from which they will turn away. In this concrete form the general truth is expressed, that “whoever forsakes God for the world, will be put to shame by God before the world itself.”

**Step 4**, God brings us into “the wilderness” (v. 14), making us feel our case is desperate indeed. And then, when all hope is gone, when the poor sinner feels there is no salvation for him, “a door of *hope*” is opened for him even in “the valley of Achor,” or “trouble”—and what is that “door of hope” but the *mercy* of God!

***Hosea 2:14— Therefore, behold, I will allure her, bring her into the wilderness and speak kindly to her.***

* The thing that makes the good news so good is the realization of just how bad the bad news is. The worse the bad news, the better the good news of Jesus Christ.

**But the Spirit’s “comforting” is painful!**

While we should never question God’s perfect ways, we must all admit that the Spirit’s methods of “comforting” are quite distressing and painful to us. We all have secretly asked ourselves “why does God allow His children to be distressed and pained when He has the power to spare us pain and heartache?”

* Sinful men are brute beasts who learn very slowly and only after much suffering. We are slow learners, prone to stray back into our old ways at the first opportunity. It is only when God has broken us and worn us into submission . . . when we no longer have any fight and resistance left in us . . . that He then comes to us tenderly to comfort. How tender are the arms of a mother or father when we have no strength left to cling to the world.
* Pink— “It is by putting into his mind thoughts of God’s mercy that the Spirit supports the fainting heart of the convicted sinner from sinking beneath abject despair. And *why* was the deliverance of the Hebrews delayed after Moses had been made manifest before them? Why were they caused to experience yet more sorely the enmity of Pharaoh? Through it the Lord would make them to feel their *impotence* as well as their wretchedness, and would exhibit more fully *His* power over the enemy.”
* The **process** of the Spirit comforting is painful. But it is the **result** that is accomplished that brings us our comfort. The change wrought in us through our trials is the comfort.

**No place for a “decision” to be saved**

Pink states that “one would naturally suppose that the good news of a free Savior and a full salvation would readily be embraced by a convicted sinner. But as a matter of fact, this is not always the case; indeed, it is rarely so. **Awakened souls are exceedingly backward from receiving comfort in the glorious gospel of Christ.** They think they are utterly unworthy and unfit to come to Christ just as they are, in all their vileness and filthiness.”

Why does Pink call this reaction to the knowledge of one’s own sinfulness “**exceedingly backward**”?

* **The wrong thinking in our reaction to our own sinfulness comes from the fact that we are focusing on the wrong person**.
* Instead of focusing on our own worthlessness and wretchedness, we should be focusing on the One who is perfect and righteous and gracious and willing to save. Once the convicted sinner has been convinced of the bad news he should not be allowed to wallow in his self-pity and self-loathing.
* Instead, once convicted of sin, the focus should be upon the Savior who has provided the way of escape from the penalty of that wretchedness. **The “exceeding backwardness” of such thinking comes in the backward focus.**  We shouldn’t look backward at ourselves, but forward to the Savior.

When Pink states that when convicted sinners see themselves as “utterly unworthy and unfit to come to Christ just as they are, in all their vileness and filthiness,” convicted sinners remain “exceedingly backward” and are prone to two significant errors. **These two errors are pride and works righteousness.**

* Regarding **the first error, pride**, it is not wrong to see ourselves as vile and filthy. The error . . . and sin . . . comes when we begin to wallow in self-pity and self-loathing. It is then that our self-pity and self-loathing become a matter of pride.
  + To hate one’s sin is the goal, but to enjoy wallowing in self-loathing is just a form of pride. Again, continual self-loathing is **a result of a backward focus** that causes us to fail to give glory to the One who has freed us from the penalty of our sins. Instead of self-loathing, we should be filled with gratitude for the gift we have received.
* The **second error, works righteousness**, results when “burdened with guilt and filled with terrifying apprehensions of eternal destruction, the convicted sinner strives to obtain acceptance with God by his own labors, tears, and prayers.”
  + The newly convicted sinner, if not properly taught, sees himself as unworthy of God’s grace and seeks to make himself worthy. It is only when “he becomes better acquainted with the high demands of the Law, the holiness of God, and the corruptions of his own heart, he reaches the point where he utterly despairs of being justified by his own strivings.”
  + The tragedy of this second error is that many convicted sinners come under the false teaching of works righteousness and are led astray. Thinking they are obeying and worshipping God, they mistakenly believe that earning their salvation is part of living the Christian life.

In studying this section on the Comforting ministry of the Holy Spirit we have learned that the process is painful, but God’s perfect result is one that truly brings great joy and comfort. Such pain that results in joy and comfort reminds us of Jesus’ comforting words to the apostles when He tells that that He must leave.

***John 16:21— “Whenever a woman is in labor she has pain, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy that a child has been born into the world.”***

As you go through the trials of life that God has ordained for you, may God grant you the knowledge and comfort in knowing that your painful trials, while difficult for a season, are ordained to accomplish a good and comforting outcome.