

# XVIII *Grieving the Holy Spirit*

*And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.*

(EPHESIANS 4:30)

When we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we remember particularly the one sacrifice of Christ and the gift of life which we receive because of it. Perhaps it is good to remind ourselves that the greatest gift we receive through that perfect sacrifice is the presence and indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

I think here of an important statement in the *Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper*: "For by His death He has removed the cause of our eternal hunger and misery, which is sin, and obtained for us the life-giving Spirit. By this Spirit, Who dwells in Christ as the Head and in us as His members, we have true communion with Him and share in all His riches, life eternal, righteousness, and glory" (*Book of Praise*, page 598).

The Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper directs us here to the events of Pentecost which followed Golgotha. Pentecost is the reality in which we live today. Because Christ died we may experience every day the power of the life-giving Spirit.

I wrote that this is a reality. I refer you to what Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:30, the words which are part of the passage presently receiving our attention: "(do not grieve the Holy Spirit) *in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.*" Paul does not ask the Ephesians *if* they were sealed with the Spirit, but reminds them *that* they were sealed with him. It is a grand reality. On the basis of that reality he dares to exhort them.

## ***Sealed with the Holy Spirit***

In an earlier section, I dealt extensively with the expression to be "sealed with the Holy Spirit." We considered what it means to be sealed with the Holy Spirit.

Let me now for the sake of understanding better the matter of grieving the Spirit, use a simple example. When a crime has been committed, the police seal off the area. Have you ever seen the yellow ribbon, which states: “Police line, do not cross”? That area is under the special jurisdiction and protection of the police.

So it is with us. We are a “sealed-off area,” so to speak. God has put a protective boundary around us which indicates that we belong to him and are in his special care. The Holy Spirit is the one who exercises this divine authority in our lives and gives us the protection and security we need.

Whenever you see that yellow tape (“Police line, do not cross”), think of the protective power of the Holy Spirit, which surrounds you like a wall. The text even says: “We have been sealed for the day of redemption,” which means that we are under God’s protection until the great day of Christ’s return. Is this not a tremendous comfort? Whatever happens, we will not be removed from the care and protection of the life-giving Spirit.

### ***Living within protective confines***

But this means that we from our side shall reckon with the presence and power of the Spirit. We shall live within the protective confines which Christ has obtained for us on the cross.

When we realize this we begin to understand the exhortation of the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 4 that we may not *grieve* the Holy Spirit. In 1 Thessalonians 5 we are told that we must not *quench* him. That is an even more serious matter, which we will consider in the next chapter. Now we concentrate on the warning that we must not grieve the Spirit. The Apostle Paul exhorts us not to grieve the Holy Spirit in whom we were sealed for the day of redemption.

The exhortations not to “grieve” and not to “quench” the Holy Spirit each stand in their own context, and if we are to understand them well we have to examine them in these contexts. I mention them together for a moment, because they are related in that they refer to common sins against the Holy Spirit.

### ***Sins against the Holy Spirit***

When I use the expression “sins against the Holy Spirit,” we should not take this to refer to *the* sin against the Holy Spirit, or the unpardonable sin, as it is often called. You know that our Lord warned against this unpardonable sin in the following words (Matt 12:31, 32): “...every sin and blas-

phemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone... who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.”

In the present text Paul obviously does not mean that specific sin, or else he would not speak of being “sealed for the day of redemption.” In neither instance (Ephesians and Thessalonians) does Paul’s admonition carry the weight of a penalty of eternal death.

I will come back to the matter of the sin against the Holy Spirit. For the sake of clarity, let me now put it this way: the sin against the Holy Spirit which is called blaspheming the Spirit is committed only by unbelievers (even if they are in the church, though not a part of it) who haughtily reject the Word of God. They are not bothered by this sin either, but are quite adamant in their rejection of God. There is deep truth in the saying that people who worry about having committed the sin against the Holy Spirit are precisely the ones who have not committed it. Those who have committed it, don’t really care. That belongs to the nature of the sin. I’ll deal with this sin further in a next chapter.

The sin which the Apostle Paul mentions here (and in 1 Thessalonians, do not quench the Spirit) is committed by *believers* who have strayed from the way and become embroiled in evil. These are serious sins, indeed, but there is a way back. Otherwise the exhortation of the Apostle would make no sense. I therefore conclude that Paul speaks in both cases about sins which Christians commit, against which they must be on guard, from which they must repent, but also from which they can by Christ’s grace return.

### **God is not without emotion**

Having said this, we ask ourselves the question, “What can the Apostle possibly mean with the expressions grieving and quenching the Spirit? Is this not a human way of speaking about God? How can God, the Holy Spirit, experience grief? How are we to interpret this grieving of God? And if the *grieving* is perhaps possible, can the Spirit really be *quenched*? Do we not believe and confess that the Holy Spirit’s power is invincible, irresistible, and therefore basically unquenchable? Who can ever extinguish the fire of the Spirit? We will deal with that aspect further in the next chapter, but now already we ask in general: does this kind of language really do justice to the Holy Spirit?

Let us look more closely at the first expression, “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God.” Obviously the Spirit of God can be grieved, touched in his heart and in his very existence. God is not without emotions. He is not

a God who acts mechanically but he is deeply involved with his creatures and he has strong personal feelings. How else could the LORD say in his law, for example, “The LORD your God is a jealous God”? Is not jealousy an expression of one of the most powerful feelings and emotions? And would it not be this divine jealousy which leads to the experience of grief?

### ***Grief is a love word***

It should strike us that the apostle uses the verb to grieve. Someone who grieves over another can do so only because he loves that person. I read somewhere that grief is a ‘love’ word. If you do not love someone, you do not grieve when that person does evil things or encounters problems. You may take note of someone’s falling, but there is no grief, no personal feeling involved. You only grieve when a loved one falls.

Think here of the relationship between parents and children. When children do not follow the way of the Lord, this causes *grief* to the parents, because they love their children deeply. Others do not experience the same feeling. Think of David, who grieved publicly over his son Absalom, “Oh my son Absalom; Absalom, my son, would that I had died in your place!” (2 Samuel 18:33)

The fact that the Holy Spirit can grieve is related to the fact that he is the Spirit of love. In Romans 15:39 Paul speaks of this love of the Spirit. Like the Father and the Son, he loves God’s children. That is the reason why he is grieved when we turn away from the Lord. We may get angry at someone whom we do not love, and even be hurt by him, but we can only grieve about someone when deep love is involved.

### ***The Spirit is the Spirit of love***

This is a comforting element in our text. The Spirit is the Spirit of love. In God’s unfathomable love he seeks us, dwells in us, works in us, and is grieved when we do not respond to him or reject his work. God loves us not just when we do good, but also when we do evil, except that then his love is mixed with grief, pain, sorrow, and anguish. I think here also of our Lord Jesus who wept and grieved over Jerusalem, saying, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem... how often have I tried to gather you as a hen gathers her chicks...” ((Luke 13:34, 35).

When the Apostle Paul here speaks of grieving the Spirit, he does not mention something new. Already in the Old Testament, the LORD made it clear via Isaiah that despite all God’s grace and love evident in Israel’s re-

demption, “they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit” (Isaiah 63:10). It was a source of sorrow and deep disappointment to God that Israel responded to his love by rebellion and idolatry. The most painful love is unrequited love. God was touched in his very being and heart, deeply affected, and brought to grieve over his people.

### ***A specific context***

When Paul here speaks of grieving the Spirit of God, he sets this in a specific context. How can the Ephesians grieve the Holy Spirit? When we pick up the context from verse 25 on we notice that there are some very specific sins by which the Spirit is grieved. Verse 25: falsehood, not speaking the truth. Verses 26 and 27: unbridled, unresolved anger. Verse 28: stealing instead of working. Verse 29: foul language instead of edifying talk. And this is summarized in the verses 31 and 32: bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, slander, and malice, instead of kindness, tender heartedness, and willingness to forgive. We are reminded here of the Ten Commandments. Therefore I conclude that grieving the Spirit of God occurs when we deliberately transgress the law of God.

All these things point to one essential matter: our heart has not been changed but is self-directed and hostile to God and the neighbour. The Spirit is constantly working in us, but if we are directed to ourselves and do not live in holiness, that same Spirit is deeply grieved. He is hurt because these sins go completely against his very nature.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of *truth* (John 14:7). He cannot accept anything that is deceitful or hypocritical. He is the Spirit of *faith* (2 Cor 4:13). He cannot stand doubt, distrust, and anxiety among God’s children. He is the Spirit of *grace* (Heb 10:29), and therefore whatever in us is hard, bitter, malicious, unforgiving and unloving grieves him deeply. The Spirit is the Spirit of *holiness* (Rom 1:4), and that is why anything vile, unclean, or dirty – also in our language – wounds him deeply.

The Holy Spirit seeks to renew and sanctify our life, and to change us completely. But if we tolerate in our lives whatever is deceitful, degrading, impure, and malicious, he is deeply grieved because he is opposed in his wondrous work of love.

Therefore this command: do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God who has sealed us for the day of redemption. But instead we are to yield to his work. Listen to his Word and do it. Break with those sins which grieve the Holy Spirit. Do this consciously and fervently. It means that we have to change our thinking and attitude. We must recognize Spirit-grieving sin,

confess it, and break with it. Is repentance not a matter of deliberate and conscious change?

The Spirit is especially grieved by these sins because in doing them we deny the love of the Father and spurn the grace of the Son. We make a mockery of the cross. This is one thing that the Spirit of God cannot accept. It touches him to the core of his very existence.

### **Turning away**

What does the Holy Spirit do when he is grieved in this way? What do we do when we are grieved at someone's sinful actions? First, of course, we admonish, gently but firmly in love. But ultimately we turn away. We turn against such a person. We draw back and leave that person to his own designs.

Does the Holy Spirit act differently? Isaiah already spoke of this to Israel. He says: "They grieved his Holy Spirit. So he turned to be their enemy and he himself fought against them" (Isaiah 63:10). The grieving Spirit becomes a chastising Spirit who is no longer with us but against us.

Isaiah also said that this turning away was temporary. God in his grace "remembered the days of old, of Moses his servant." God recalled his covenant of grace and he did not cast Israel off forever. But in the meantime, what discipline resulted, what suffering for Israel – deportation and exile – , and how many died. Only a remnant returned. When the Spirit of God is grieved and turns against God's people, there are many casualties and there are very dark days.

The result of our grieving the Holy Spirit is that he turns away from us, even against us, and brings us into great trials. It can lead to great spiritual distress for us. The *Canons of Dort* speak about this in a deeply moving way (Chapter V, Art. 5). When we fall into serious and atrocious sins, we confess there, we "greatly offend God, incur deadly guilt, grieve the Holy Spirit, suspend the exercise of faith, wound [our] consciences, and sometimes for a while lose the sense of God's favour..."

Do you know what happens when we nurture and harbour a sin and so grieve the Holy Spirit? Consider what David confesses in Psalm 32 (*Book of Praise*):

"When I kept silent, sinful ways condoning,  
I pined away through my incessant groaning.  
Thy hand weighed down on me in my deceit;  
My strength was sapped as by the summer's heat."

## ***David and Bathsheba (Psalm 32)***

David had greatly grieved the Spirit of God in his sin with Bathsheba and Uriah. But at first he did not repent. He tried to cover it up and pretended that it never happened. In the meantime, however, the Spirit of God put him in a spiritual vacuum. David began to pine away, and that means simply that he became a physical and emotional wreck. “My strength was sapped as by the summer’s heat.”

Hot and humid weather can make us feel tired and listless. David entered literally into a deep depression: “Thy hand weighed down on me....” God pressed down on him. God was no longer with him, but against him.

The result is that David experienced what we confess in the Canons of Dort: he lost the sense of God’s favour. He experienced the Spirit of God turning away from him. That is why later, when he has repented, he exclaims, “Let nought me from thy Holy Spirit sever!” (Ps 51:4, *Book of Praise*). The worst thing that ever happened to him was that the Holy Spirit withdrew from him, that he was severed and cut off from the Holy Spirit, and he begs God: O Lord, do not ever let this happen again!

We see the depth of God’s grace in that the Spirit of God only for a while turned against David. The Canons of Dort say it so beautifully: we sometimes for a while lose the sense of God’s favour, “until [we] return to the right way through sincere repentance, and God’s fatherly face again shines upon [us].” What we read in this text in Ephesians 4 was true for David: he was *sealed* by the Spirit for the day of redemption. God restored to him a sense of grace and new life. But at what cost! How deep did David have to bend before the Lord lifted him up.

## ***The miracle of salvation***

Do you know why it was possible for the Holy Spirit to take David up again in his comforting grace? Do you know why we can be sealed for the day of redemption? This is true only because of the great Son of David, Jesus Christ. He had to experience fully what it means to lose the sense of God’s favour. When every one had left him in those dark hours before Golgotha, also the Holy Spirit withdrew from him and he was cast into the anguish of hell.

God took away from him the comforting presence of the Holy Spirit, so that he cried out in the greatest despair, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Ps 22:1) He had never grieved the Holy Spirit, but had always lived in full obedience and yet he was forsaken of God for our sake.

There lies the great miracle of salvation. Christ bore for us the wrath of God, and underwent total desolation and loneliness so that he might obtain for us the life-giving Spirit. So we may know in all our weaknesses and failing that the Spirit will not leave us, not even in great sin. The light of God's grace will again shine upon us. We have been sealed by the Holy Spirit for the day of victory.

### ***Do not despise God's grace***

But if that is true, we must not despise God's grace in Christ. We must strive all the more never to grieve the Holy Spirit. It must be also our song: "Let nought me from thy Holy Spirit sever." For without the Spirit there is no joy. We may outwardly pretend that all is well, but inwardly we are deeply miserable and wretched. We make life very difficult for ourselves and for others around us.

Many difficulties in life – if not most of them – stem from this fact that we are nurturing sin and are grieving the Spirit of God. We are stubborn and foolish. We make it needlessly difficult for ourselves and cause despair in our life and grief to God. Why do we not begin with believing in childlike faith that we have been sealed by the Holy Spirit for the day of redemption? It is said here to us: you have been sealed. We must consciously build on that reality in a life of obedience. Then God will certainly grant us time and again the sense of his favour.

It is already terrible when we grieve each other. It is awful when husband and wife cause each other grief or when children cause grief to their parents. In these situations we must resort sometimes to strong discipline.

But it is worse when we grieve the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit turns against us, life becomes empty and meaningless. But when he is with us, we experience the peace that transcends understanding (cf. Phil 4:7). Then we learn the beauty of truth. We do not let the sun go down on our anger. We rejoice in our daily work. We who have received grace can be gracious to others. We will experience in our lives the wonderful, comforting, and renewing power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Then he surrounds us like a wall and lifts us up in all the trials of life to experience his salvation.