

The Harlot's Face in the Mirror of Scripture,  
John Flavel, Puritan on Sanctification

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By John Flavel

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4710-37A Avenue NW  
Edmonton, Alberta  
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"The Harlot's Face in the Mirror of Scripture," originally titled, "The Harlot's Face in the Scripture Glass," by John Flavel.

The next danger I shall give you warning of, is the sin of uncleanness; with which I fear too many of the rude and looser sort of seamen defile themselves; and possibly, the temptations to this sin are advantaged, and strengthened upon them more than others, by their condition and employments. Let no man be offended that I here give warning of this evil: I intend to asperse no man's person, or raise up jealousy against any; but would faithfully discharge my duty to all, and that in all things. It was the complaint of Salvian many hundred years ago, that he could not speak against the vices of men, but one or other would thus object; "There he meant me; he hit me," and so storm and fret. Alas (as he replieth), "It is not we that speak to you, but your own conscience; we speak to the order, but conscience speaks to the person."

I shall use no other apology in this case. That this sin is a dreadful gulf, a quick-sand that hath sucked in, and destroyed thousands, is truly apparent both from scripture and experience. Solomon tells us, Proverbs 22:14, that it is a " deep ditch, into which such as are abhorred of the Lord shall "fall." Oh, the multitudes of dead that are there, and if so, I cannot in duty to God, or in love to you, be silent, where the danger is so great.

It is both needless, and besides my intention here is to insist largely upon the explication of the particulars in which uncleanness is distributed: the more ordinary and common sins of this kind are known by the names of adultery and fornication. The latter is when single persons come together out of the state of marriage. The former is, when at least one of the persons committing uncleanness is contracted in marriage. This now is the evil I shall warn you of and, that thou mayest never fall into this pit, I shall endeavor to hedge and fence up the way to it by these ensuing arguments: and, oh, that the light of every argument may be powerfully reflected upon your conscience!

Many men are wise in generals, but very vain in the reasonings or imaginations, as the apostle calls them, Romans 1:21. i.e. in their practical inferences. They are good at speculation, but bunglers at application: but it is truth in the particulars, that, like an hot iron, pierces; and, oh, that you may find these to be such in your soul! To that end consider,

Argument 1. The names and titles by which this sin is known in Scripture are very vile and base. The Spirit of God, doubtless, hath put such odious names upon it, on purpose to deter and affright men from it. In general it is called lust; and so (as one notes) it beareth the name of its mother; it is uncleanness in the abstract, Numbers 5:19; filthiness itself; an abomination, Ezekiel 22:11. And they that commit it are called abominable, Revelation 21:8.

Varro saith, the word imports that which is not lawful to mention; or rather, abominably persons, such as are not fit for the society of men, such as should be hissed out of all men's company: they are rather to be reckoned to be beasts than men. Yea, the Scripture compares them to the filthiest of beasts, even to dogs. When Ishbosheth charged this sin upon Abner, 2 Samuel 3:8, "Am I a dog's head," saith he, "that thou chargest me with a fault concerning this woman?" And in Deuteronomy 23:18. the hire of a whore, and the "price of a dog," are put together. The expression of this lust in words or gesture, is called neighing, Jeremiah 5:8, even as fed horses do, that scatter their lust promiscuously. Or, if the Scripture speaks of them as men, yet it allows them but the external shape of men, not the understanding of men.

Among the Jews they were called fools in Israel, 2 Samuel 13:13, and so Proverbs 6:32. "Whosoever committeth adultery with a woman lacketh understanding." And sinners, Luke 7:37, "And behold a woman that was a sinner," that is, an eminent notorious sinner: by which term the Scripture deciphers an unclean person, as if, among sinners, there were none of such a prodigious stature in sin as they. And we find, that when the Spirit of God would set forth any sin by an odious name, he calls it adultery; so idolatry is called adultery, Ezekiel 16:32. And indeed this spiritual and corporeal adultery oftentimes are found in the same persons. They that give themselves up to the one, are, by the righteous hand of God given up to the other, as it is too manifestly and frequently exemplified in the world. So earthly-mindedness hath this name put upon it on purpose to affright men from it, James 4:4.

Now certainly God would never borrow the name of this sin to set out the evil of other sins if it were not most vile and abominable. It is called the sin of the Gentiles, or heathens, 1 Thessalonians 4:5. And, oh, that we could say, it were only among them that know not God? How then are you able to look these Scriptures in the face, and not blush? O what a sin is this! Art thou willing to be ranked with fools, dogs, sinners, heathens, and take thy lot with them? God hath planted that affection of shame in thy nature to be as a guard against such filthy lusts; it is a sin that hath filthiness enough in it to defile the tongue that mentions it, Ephesians 5:3.

Argument 2. It is a sin that the God of heaven hath often prohibited and severely condemned in the word, which abundantly declares his abhorrence of it. You have prohibition upon prohibition, and threatening upon threatening in the word against it; Exodus 20:14, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." This was delivered upon Mount Sinai with the greatest solemnity and terror by the mouth of God himself. Turn to and ponder the following scriptures among many others, Proverbs 5:2-4; Acts 5:29. Romans 1:24, 29; Romans 13:13; 1 Corinthians 6:13-18; 2 Corinthians 12:21; Galatians 5:29. All these, with many others, are the true sayings of God: by them thou shalt be tried in the last day.

Now, consider how terrible it will be to have so many words of God, and such terrible ones too as most of those are, to be brought in and pleaded against thy soul in that day. Mountains and hills may depart, but these words shall not depart: heaven and earth shall pass away, but not one tittle of the word shall not pass away. Believe it, sinner, as sure as the heavens are over thy head, and the earth under thy feet, they shall one day take hold of thee, though we poor worms who plead them with thee, die and perish, Zechariah 1:5, 6. The Lord tells us it shall not fall to the ground which is a borrowed speech from a dart that is flung with a weak hand; it goes not home to the mark, but falls to the ground by the way. None of these words shall so fall to the ground.

Argument 3. It is a sin that defiles and destroys the body, 1 Corinthians 6:18, "He that committeth adultery, sinneth against his own body." In most other sins the body is the instrument, here it is the object against which the sin is committed: that body of thine, which should be the temple of the Holy Ghost, is turned into a sty of filthiness; yea, it not only defiles, but destroys it. Job calls it a "fire that burneth to destruction," Job 31:12. or as the Septuagint reads it, a fire that burneth in all the members. It is a sin that God hath plagued with strange and terrible diseases.

There were judgments sent immediately by God's own hand, to correct the new sins and enormities of the world; for they seem to put the best physicians besides their books. Oh, how terrible is it to lie groaning under the sad effects of this sin! As Solomon tells us, Proverbs 5:11, "And thou mourn at the last, when thy flesh and thy body are consumed." To this sense some expound that terrible text, Hebrews 13:4, "Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled; but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge," i. e. with some remarkable judgment inflicted on them in this world. If it escape the punishment of men, it shall not escape the vengeance of God. Ah, with what comfort may a man lie down upon a sick-bed, when the sickness can be looked upon as a fatherly visitation coming in mercy? But thou that shortenest thy life, and bringest sickness on thyself by such a sin, art the devil's martyr, and to whom canst thou turn in such a day for comfort?

Argument 4. Consider what an indelible blot it is to thy nature, which can never be wiped away. Though thou escape with thy life, yet, as one says, thou shalt be burnt in the hand, yea, branded in the forehead. What a foul scare is that upon the face of David himself, which abides to this day? "He was upright in all things, save in the matter of Uriah." And how was he slighted by his own children and servants after he had committed this sin! Compare 1 Samuel 2:30 with 2 Samuel 11:10, 11, "A wound and dishonor shall he get;

and his reproach shall not be wiped away. This is to give thine honor to another," Proverbs 5:9.

The shame and reproach attending it should be a preservative from it. Indeed the devil tempts to it by hopes of secrecy and concealment; but though many other sins lie hid, and possibly shall never come to light until that day of manifestation of all hidden things, yet this is a sin that is most usually discovered. Under the law, God appointed an extraordinary way for the discovery of it, Numbers 5:13. And to this day the providence of God doth often very strangely bring it to light, though it be a deed of darkness. The Lord hath many times brought such persons, either by terror of conscience, frenzy, or some other means, to be the publishers and proclaimers of their own shame. Yea, observe this, said the reverend Mr. Hildersham on the fourth of John, "Even those that are most cunning to conceal and hide it from the eyes of the world, yet through the just judgment of God, every one suspects and condemns them for it. This dashes in pieces, at one stroke that vessel in which the precious ointment of a good name is carried. A fool in Israel shall be thy title; and even children shall point at thee."

Argument 5. It scatters thy substance, and roots up the foundation of thy estate, Job 31:12. It roots up all thy increase. "Strangers shall be filled with thy wealth, and thy labors shall be in the house of a stranger," Proverbs 5:10. "For by means of a whorish woman, a man is brought to a morsel of bread," Proverbs 5:26. It gives rags for its livery, saith one, and though it be furthered by the fulness, yet it is followed with a morsel of bread. This is one of those temporal judgments with which God punishes the unclean person in this life.

The word "Delilah," which is the name of a harlot, is conceived to come from a root that signifies to exhaust, drain, or draw dry. This sin will quickly exhaust the fullest estate, and, oh, what a dreadful thing will this be, when God shall require an account of thy stewardship in the great day. How righteous is it, that that man should be fuel to the wrath of God, whose health and wealth have been so much fuel to maintain the flame of lust. Oh, how lavish of their estates are sinners to satisfy their lusts. If the members of Christ be sick or in prison, they may there perish and starve before they will relieve them, but to obtain their lusts, oh, how expensive.

"Ask me never so much, and I will give it," saith Shechem, Genesis 34:12. "Ask what thou wilt, and it shall be given thee," said Herod to the daughter of Herodias. Well, you are liberal in spending treasures upon your lusts; and believe it, God will spend treasures of wrath to punish you for your lusts. It had been a thousand times better for thee thou hadst never had an estate, that thou hadst begged thy bread from door to door, than to have such a sad reckoning as thou shalt shortly have for it.

Argument 6. Oh, stand off from this sin, because it is a pit, out of which very few have been recovered that have fallen therein. Few are the footsteps of returners from this den. The longer a man lives in it, the less power he hath to leave it. It is not only a damning but an infatuating sin. The danger of falling this way must needs be great, and the fall very desperate because few that fall into it do ever rise again.

I shall lay two very terrible Scriptures before you to this purpose, either of them enough to drive thee speedily to Christ, or to drive thee out of thy wits. The one is that, Ecclesiastes 7:26, "And I find more bitter than death, the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and her hands as bands: Whoso pleaseth God shall escape from her, but the sinner shall be taken by her." The argument which the Spirit of God uses here to dissuade from this sin is taken from the subject. They that fall into it, for the most part, are persons in whom God has no delight, and so in judgment are delivered up to it, and never recovered by grace from it. The other is that in Proverbs 22:14, "The mouth of a strange woman is a deep pit; he that is abhorred of the Lord shall fall therein." Oh, terrible word, able to daunt the heart of the securest sinner. Your whores embrace you, yea, but God abhors you. You have their love, oh but you are under God's hatred. What say you to these two Scriptures? If you are not atheists, methinks such a word from the mouth of God should strike like a dart through thy soul. And upon this account it is, that they never are recovered because God has no delight in them.

If this be not enough, view one Scripture more, Proverbs 2:18, 19, "For her house inclineth unto death, and her paths unto the dead: None that go to her, return again, neither take they hold of the paths of life." Listener, if thou be a person addicted to this sin, go thy way, and think seriously what a case thou art in. None return again, i. e. a very few of many.

The examples of such as have been recovered are very rare. Pliny tells us the mermaids are commonly seen in green meadows, and have enchanting voices, but there are always found heaps of dead men's bones lying by them. This may be but a fabulous story, but I am sure it is true of the harlot, whose siren songs have allured thousands to their inevitable destruction. It is a captivating sin that leads away the sinner in triumph. They cannot deliver their souls, Proverbs 7:22, "He goeth after her straightway, as an ox goeth to the slaughter, or as a fool to the correction of the stocks." Mark, a fool, it dementates and befools men, takes away their understanding. The Septuagint renders it, "as a dog to the collar," or like as we used to say, "a dog in a string."

I have read of one that having by this sin wasted his body, was told by physicians, that except he left it, he would quickly lose his eyes. He answered, "If it be so, then farewell sweet light." And I remember Luther writes of a certain nobleman in his country, who was so besotted with the sin of whoredom, that he was not ashamed to say, that if he might live here forever, and be carried from one stew to another, he would never desire any other heaven.

The greatest conquerors, that have subdued kingdoms, and scorned to be commanded by any, have been miserably enslaved and captivated by this lust. Oh, think sadly upon this argument. God often gives them up to impertinency, and will not spend a rod upon them to reclaim them. See Hosea 4:14; Revelation 22:11.

And then in the 7<sup>th</sup> place, those few that have been recovered by repentance out of it, oh, how bitter hath God made it to their souls. "I find it," saith Solomon, "more bitter than

death," Ecclesiastes 7:26. Death is a very bitter thing. Oh, what a struggling and reluctance is there in nature against it, but this is more bitter.

Poor David found it so when he roared under those bloody lashes of conscience for it in Psalm 51. Ah, when the Lord shall open the poor sinner's eyes to see the horror and guilt he hath hereby contracted upon his own poor soul, it will haunt him as a ghost day and night, and terrify his soul with dreadful forms and representations. Oh, dear-bought pleasure, if this were all it should cost. What is now become of the pleasure of sin? Oh, what gall and wormwood wilt thou taste, when once the Lord shall bring thee to a sight of it.

The Hebrew word for repentance and the Greek word, the one signifies an irking of the soul, and the other signifies after grief. Yea, it is called a renting of the heart, as if it were torn in pieces in a man's breast. Ask such a poor soul, what it thinks of such a course now. Oh, now it loaths, abhors itself for them. Ask him, if he dare sin in that kind again? You may as well ask me. Will he answer whether I will thrust my hand into the fire. Oh, it breeds an indignation in him against himself.

The word in 2 Corinthians 7:11 signifies the rising of the stomach with very rage and being sick with anger. Religious wrath is the fiercest wrath. Oh, what a furnace is the breast of a poor penitent, what fumes, what heats do abound in it, whilst the sin is even before him, and the sense of the guilt upon him? One night of carnal pleasure will keep thee many days and nights upon the rack of horror, if ever God give thee repentance unto life.

Argument 8. And if thou never repent, as indeed but few do that fall into this sin, then consider how God will follow thee with eternal vengeance. Thou shalt have flaming fire for burning lust. This is a sin that hath the scent of fire and brimstone with it wherever you meet with it in Scripture. The harlot's guests are lodged in the depths of hell, Proverbs 9:18. No more perfumed beds, they must now lie down in flames. Whoremongers shall have their part in the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone which is the second death, Revelation 21:8. Such shall not inherit the kingdom of God and Christ, 1 Corinthians 6: 9. No dog shall come into the New Jerusalem. There shall in no wise enter in any thing that defileth, or that worketh abomination. You have spent your strength upon sin, and now God sets himself a work to show the glory of his power in punishing, Romans 9:22. The wrath of God is transacted upon them in hell by his own immediate hand, Hebrews 10:30.

Because no creature is strong enough to convey all his wrath, and it must all be poured out upon them, therefore he himself will torment them for ever with his own immediate power. Now he will stir up all his wrath, and sinners shall know the price of their pleasures. The punishment of Sodom is a little map of hell, as I may say. Oh, how terrible a day was that upon those unclean wretches, but that fire was not of many days continuance. When it had consumed them, and their houses, it went out for lack of matter but here the breath of the Lord, like a stream of brimstone, kindles it. The pleasure was quickly gone but the sting and torment abide for ever. Who knoweth the power of his

anger? Even according to his fear, so is his wrath, Psalm 90:11. Oh, consider, how will this almighty power rack and torment thee! Think on this when sin comes with a smiling face towards thee in the temptation. Oh, think. If the human nature of Christ recoiled when his cup of wrath was given him to drink and if he were sore amazed at it, how shalt thou, a poor worm, bear and grapple with it for ever?

Argument 9. Consider further how closely soever thou carriest thy wickedness in this world, though it should never be discovered here, yet there is a day coming when all will out, and that before angels and men. God will rip up thy secret sins in the face of that great congregation at the day of judgment, then that which was done in secret shall be proclaimed as upon the housetop, Luke 12:3. Then God will judge the secrets of men, Romans 2:16. The hidden things of darkness will be brought into the open light.

Sinner, there will be no skulking for thee in the grave, no declining this bar; thou refusedst, indeed, to come to the throne of grace when God invited thee, but there will be no refusing to appear before the bar of justice when Christ shall summon thee. And as thou canst not decline appearing, so neither canst thou then palliate and hide thy wickedness any longer, for then shall the books be opened, the book of God's omniscience and the book of thine own conscience wherein all thy secret villany is recorded, for though it ceased to speak to thee, yet it ceased not to write and record thy actions. If thy shameful sins should be divulged now, it would make thee tear off thy hair with indignation, but then all will be discovered. Angels and men shall point at thee, and say, "Lo, this is the man, this is he that carried it so smoothly in the world."

Mr. Thomas Fuller relates a story of Ottokar king of Bohemia, who refusing to do his homage to Rodolphus the first emperor, being at last sorely chastised with war, condescended to do him homage privately in a tent, but the tent was so contrived by the emperor's servants, saith the historian, that by drawing one cord, it was taken all away, and so Ottokar presented on his knees, doing homage to the emperor in the view of three armies. Oh, sirs, you think to carry it closely, you wait for the twilight that none may see you, but, alas, it will be to no end. This day will discover it and then what confusion and everlasting shame will cover thee.

Argument 10. Lastly, consider but one thing more, and I have done. By this sin thou dost not only damn thine own soul, but drawest another to hell with thee. This sin is not as a single bullet that kills but one, but as a chain-shot, it kills many, two at least, unless God give repentance. And if he should give thee repentance, yet the other party may never repent, and so perish forever through thy wickedness, and oh, what a sad consideration will that be to thee, to such a poor soul is in hell, or likely to go thither by thy means. Thou hast made fast a snare upon a soul, which thou canst not untie. Thou hast done that which may be matter of sorrow to thee as long as thou livest, but though thou canst grieve for it, thou canst not remedy it.

In other sins it is not so. If thou hadst stolen another's goods, restitution might be made to the injured party, but here can be none. If thou hadst murdered another, thy sin was thine

own, not his that was murdered by thee. But this is a complicated sin defilling both at once, and if neither repent, then, oh, what a sad greeting will these poor wretches have in hell. How will they curse the day that ever they saw each other's face. Oh, what an aggravation of their misery will this be. For look, as it will be matter of joy in heaven, to behold such there as we have been instrumental to save, so must it needs be a stinging aggravation of the misery of the damned to look upon those who have been the instruments and means of their damnation.

Oh, methinks if there be any tenderness at all in thy conscience, if this sin have not totally brownd and stupefied thee, these arguments should pierce like a sword through thy guilty soul. Listener, I beseech thee, by the mercies of God, if thou hast defiled thy soul by this abominable sin, speedily to repent. Oh, get the blood of sprinkling upon thee. There is yet mercy for such a wretch as thou art, if thou wilt accept the terms of it. Such were some of you, but ye are washed, 1 Corinthians 6:11. Publicans and harlots may enter into the kingdom of God, Matthew 21:31. Though but few such are recovered, yet how knowest thou but the hand of mercy may pull thee as a brand out of the fire, if now thou wilt return and seek it with tears. Though it be a fire that consumeth unto destruction, as Job calls it, Job 31:12, yet it is not an unquenchable fire, the blood of Christ can quench it.

And for you, whom God hath kept hitherto from the contagion of it, oh, bless the Lord, and use all God's means for the prevention of it. The seeds of this sin are in thy nature. No thanks to thee but to restraining grace that thou art not delivered up to it also, and that thou mayest be kept out of this pit, consciously practice these few directions.

Direction 1. Beg of God a clean heart, renewed and sanctified by saving grace. All other endeavors do but palliate a cure. The root of this is deep in thy nature. Oh, get that mortified, Matthew 15:19. Out of the heart proceed fornication, adulteries, 1 Peter 2:11, 12. Abstain from fleshly lusts having your conversation honest. The lust must first be subdued, before the conversation can be honest.

Direction 2. Walk in the fear of God all the day long, and in the sense of his omniscient eye that is ever upon thee. This kept Joseph from this sin, Genesis 39:9. "How can I do this wickedness and sin against God?" Consider, the darkness hideth not from him, but shineth as the light. If thou couldst find a place where the eye of God should not discover thee, it were somewhat. Thou darest not to act this wickedness in the presence of a child, and wilt thou adventure to commit it before the face of God? See that argument, Proverbs 5:20, 21, "And why wilt thou, my son, be ravished with a strange woman, and embrace the bosom of a stranger? For the ways of man are before the eyes of the Lord, and he pondereth all his goings."

Direction 3. Avoid lewd company, and the society of unclean persons. They are but panders for lust. Evil communication corrupts good manners. The tongues of sinners do cast fireballs into the hearts of each other which the corruption within is easily kindled and inflamed by.



Direction 4. Exercise thyself in thy calling diligently. It will be an excellent means of preventing this sin. It is a good observation that one hath that Israel was safer in the brick-kilns in Egypt, than in the plains of Moab, 2 Samuel 11:2, "And it came to pass in the eventide, that David arose from off his bed, and walked on the roof of the king's house," and this was the occasion of his fall.

Direction 5. Put a restraint upon thine appetite. Feed not to excess. Fullness of bread and idleness were the sins of Sodom that occasioned such exuberancy of lust. "They are like fed horses, every one neighing after his neighbor's wife. When I had fed them to the full, then they committed adultery, and assembled themselves by troops in the harlots' houses," Jeremiah 5:7, 8. This is a sad requital of the bounty of God, in giving us the enjoyment of the creatures, to make them fuel to lust.

Direction 6. Make choice of a meet yoke-fellow and delight in her in whom you have chosen. This is a lawful remedy. See 1 Corinthians 7:9. God ordained it, Genesis 2:21. But herein appears the corruption of nature, that men delight to tread by-paths, and forsake the way which God hath appointed, as that divine poet, Mr. Herbert, saith.

"If God had laid all common, certainly  
Man would have been the closer, but since now  
God hath impal'd us, on the contrary,  
Man breaks the fence, and every ground will plow.  
O what were man, might he himself misplace!  
Sure, to be cross, he would shift feet and face."

Stolen waters are sweeter to them than those waters they might lawfully drink at their own fountain, but withal know, it is not the having but the delighting in a lawful wife, as God requires you to do, that thou must be a fence against this sin. So Solomon, Proverbs 5:19, "Let her be as the loving hind, and pleasant roe; let her breasts satisfy thee at all times, and be thou ravished always with her love."

Direction 7. Take heed of running on in a course of sin, especially superstition and idolatry in which cases, and as a punishment of which evils God often gives up men to these vile affections, Romans 1: 25, "Who changed the truth of God into a lie, worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen. For this cause, God gave them up to vile affections," and so on. They that defile their souls by idolatrous practices, God suffers, as a just recompense, their bodies also to be defiled with uncleanness, that so their ruin may be hastened.

Let the admirers of traditions beware of such a judicial tradition as this is. Woe to him that is thus delivered by the hand of an angry God. No punishment in the world like this, when God punishes sin with sin, when he shall suffer those common notices of conscience to be quenched, and all restraints to be moved out of the way of sin, it will not be long e'er that sinner come to his own place.

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And remember that John Calvin in defending the Reformation's regulative principle of worship or what is sometimes called the scriptural law of worship, commenting on the words of God, "Which I commanded them not, neither came into my heart," from his commentary on Jeremiah 7:31 writes, "God here cuts off from men every occasion for making evasions since he condemns by this one phrase, 'I have not commanded them,' whatever the Jews devised. There is then no other argument needed to condemn superstitions than that they are not commanded by God for when men allow themselves to worship God according to their own fancies and attend not to his commands, they pervert true religion, and if this principle is adopted by the papists, all those fictitious modes of worship in which they absurdly exercise themselves would fall to the ground. It is indeed a horrible thing for the papist to seek to discharge their duties towards God by performing their own superstitions. There is an immense number of them, as it is well-known and as it manifestly appears. Were they to admit this principle that we cannot rightly worship God except by obeying his word, they would be delivered from their deep abyss of error. The prophet's words then are very important when he says that God had commanded no such thing and that it never came to his mind, as though he had said that men assume too much wisdom when they devise what he never required, nay what he never knew."