

**WATCHFULNESS IN THE
CHRISTIAN LIFE
WILHELMUS À BRAKEL'S
IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTION TO REFORMED
SPIRITUALITY**

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Watchfulness in the Wilderness

Watchfulness is a Christian grace and duty that accompanies other spiritual graces, and helps protect against carelessness in our pilgrimage in the Christian life. The Bible redemptive-historically situates believers in the wilderness. We are living as God's people between our beginning return home from exile through the cross and resurrection of Jesus, and our awaiting the full redemption that is to come when our Lord returns (1 Pet. 1:17, 2:9-11; Heb. 11:9, 13-16; 1 Cor. 10:1-11).

The wilderness is a place in redemptive-history that is fraught with difficulties, dangers, and disappointments for the believer. The wilderness in Scripture is a place of great temptation and testing for the people of God on their pilgrimage to the Promised Land. God is with us, and is spiritually at work to use these difficulties as a means of our sanctification (Exo. 7:6; Numbers 3:4, 10:12, 13:26, 14:16-35; Psa. 63; 68:7; 78:52; Matt. 4; Heb. 3:8; Rev. 12:6, 14).¹ Daily as pilgrims, we must engage in spiritual warfare, and therefore we must never as Christians become careless in our daily walk. It is incumbent upon us and necessary for survival for us to stay watchful in order to grow in our sanctification and avoid the carelessness of other believers who have gone before us. We are no different from them, and must learn from their mistakes and poor examples (1 Cor. 10:1-11; Heb. 3:8).² There was much neglect in the wilderness because of carelessness and lack of watchfulness. Each generation of Christians much learn to be

¹ Wilhelmus à Brakel, *Christian's Reasonable Service*, epub [Kindle Location, 15352, chap. 25, 'The Duty to Join the Church and to Remain with Her'].

² ^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 10:6,11**: Now these things [in the Old Covenant in the wilderness] took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did....Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.

watchful, lest we fall, too!³ Let us be reminded of Bunyan's description of the "Man of Despair" shut up in an iron cage in Interpreter's House. When asked how he came into his present condition, the man declared: "I left off watching, and to be sober. I laid the reins upon the neck of my lusts." The Interpreter wisely says: "Let this man's misery be remembered by you, and be an everlasting caution to you."⁴

Watchfulness in the Christian life is a prayerful and carefully circumspect attitude and focus in living out one's faith. Watchfulness is another aspect of what our faith wonderfully does as it seeks to continually flee to Christ each day, to take cover under His gracious and safe wings of mercy. Watchfulness is concerned with always being on guard by the power of the Holy Spirit to the grace and glorious promises of the LORD, and waiting for them to be fully realized. But also watchfulness is concerned with being sober and reminding oneself constantly of the gospel warnings and sober admonitions of Holy Scripture. Watchfulness is an attitude that realizes that as a Christian, one is still in danger and has not made it completely home yet, although eternal life and glory has dawned in the heart of the believer through the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom. 5:3-5). The watchful Christian is making progress in holiness because watchfulness is an aspect of, or fruit of one's holiness in Jesus.⁵

³ For example, circumcision was neglected in the wilderness and the Sabbath among many other sins such as idolatry and spiritual presumption and idle worldliness, Joshua 5:5.

⁴ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 32-33.

⁵ Watchfulness has elements of both mortification and vivification to put it in theological categories. Watchfulness helps us to keep an eye on sin and Satan, as well as helps us to look to Christ for growth in grace as we seek to imitate Him in our lives.

à Brakel's Important Contribution to Reformed Spirituality

Reformed, experiential theologians, such as the English Puritans encouraged believers in their writings with the importance of watchfulness in the Christian life.⁶ However, it was an important and unique contribution of Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635-1711) to actually emphasize it as a particularly important aspect of piety, or biblical spirituality, and a category of sanctification in a work of pastoral-systematic theology.⁷ Wilhelmus à Brakel was an important Reformed forefather in the faith, a faithful minister of the Dutch Further Reformation,⁸ who revealed in his magnum opus *The Christian's Reasonable Service* a rich, Spirit-infused, biblical-theological knowledge of God's word, and a pastoral heart that was ruthlessly committed to applying the Scriptures to the hearts of Christ's people.⁹

Watchfulness as an Aspect of Sanctification

à Brakel believed, along with the English Puritans, that doctrinal truth must be experienced truth. What the Scriptures teach about both the blessings and the dangers

⁶ Note the English Puritan authors such as John Flavel, John Owen, Richard Baxter, William Gurnall, and Richard Sibbes. Watchfulness in other Reformed, experiential pastor-teachers was not a focused separate topic of sanctification, but part of the biblical command to be sober and careful in the Christian life, and included in their exegesis of particular passages. à Brakel included watchfulness as a separate loci or sub-category of sanctification which was quite unique.

⁷ Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service, in which Divine Truths concerning the Covenant of Grace are Expounded, Defended against Opposing Parties, and their Practice Advocated, as well as The Administration of this Covenant in the Old and New Testaments*, Trans. Rev. Bartel Elshout, Ed. Dr. Joel R. Beeke, Vols. I-IV, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011 (Fifth printing). Epub, Kindle Edition, Reformation Heritage, 2014.

⁸ In Dutch, *Nadere Reformatie*, this was the "twin movement" in the Netherlands of the Reformation of the Seventeenth Century in English Puritanism. The Dutch Further Reformation placed matters of faith in God and godly piety central to the church and the people's lives. They longed to apply Scripture properly so that the people of God would grow in grace. See further Bartel Elshout, *The Pastoral and Practical Theology of Wilhelmus à Brakel* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1997), 5-6.

⁹ à Brakel wrote his pastoral-systematic theology to minister specifically to his congregation in Rotterdam. He was known as a pastor who spoke the message of the Bible "from his heart to the heart of his hearers" and this is evident in his massive pastoral work.

of the Christian life must be taken seriously if we are to make progress in our faith. Sanctification is the will of God for the believer and the end goal for all of God's children (1 Thess. 4:3; Eph. 1:3-5). Sanctification is the teaching that we might grow into Christ-like maturity, not perfectly, but substantially by God's grace in this life in reliance upon the power of God's Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:11-16; Gal. 4:19; Phil. 3:9-14). à Brakel wrote:

“The Holy Spirit, having infused spiritual life in [believers] at regeneration, maintains that life by His continual influence, stirs it up, activates it, and causes it to function in harmony with its spiritual nature—doing so in that order which God has established as far as the functioning of man’s intellect, will, and affections are concerned, as well as the works which proceed from these. Man, being thus moved by the influence of God’s Spirit, moves, sanctifies Himself, engages in that activity which his new nature desires and is inclined toward, and does that which he knows to be his duty.”¹⁰

As Christians, à Brakel emphasized that believers should be growing in grace to become more effective and fruitful in our knowledge of the Lord Jesus.¹¹ Although Christians are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, nevertheless, they should be committed to striving strenuously to make progress in the Christian life. A mature Christian, à Brakel pastorally exhorted, was one who understood that she had made but a small beginning in holiness. Although in regeneration and in her union with Jesus Christ, the Christian is positionally holy in Christ (1 Cor. 1:30; 6:11), nevertheless

¹⁰ Vol. III, 5.

¹¹ This was a special concern for Pastor à Brakel because of his concern for the saints being threatened by Antinomianism of his day. Antinomianism simply defined here was (is!) an explicit or implicit disregard to God's Laws and commandments as a way to live before God, and as a way that defines what holiness is. A concern for watchfulness, as an aspect of sanctification, is also a concern to prevent the saints from carelessness of all kinds, especially those that would deny the importance of God's Law given to the Christian, not as a way of salvation, but as a way of living the Christian life once one is redeemed by Christ. See à Brakel, *Christian's Reasonable Service*, Vol. I, Introduction; Vol. III, 54, 150. See also Mark Jones, *Antinomianism: Reformed Theology's Unwelcome Guest*, P&R, 2013.

holiness must be constantly pursued because there remains much corruption within the heart of a Christian.¹²

Growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus is at the heart of true Christianity. It is the focus of experiential theology, and the reason why it is important to seek to hear and apply all of the teaching of Scripture, by the Holy Spirit, to our hearts.

As we are taught in 2 Peter 1:3-8:

“His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence,⁴ by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge,⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness,⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love.⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

à Brakel understood as a devoted and caring Reformed pastor, in touch with his own sinful, yet redeemed heart, and living in a time when there was much knowledge of religion without proper experience of it in the heart, that man could easily deceive himself, and thus he uniquely in the writing of his blessed sacred theology including practical observations on the truths taught in each topic of systematic theology. à Brakel understood that the believer was to learn doctrine in order for the life of Christ within

¹² à Brakel, epub [Kindle Location 14488, Chap. 24 ‘Concerning the Church’]. à Brakel wrote: “Holiness is the most beautiful ornament and the most magnificent beauty which can be found in man.” Ibid. epub [Kindle Location 27814, Chap. 44, Sanctification and Holiness].

him to grow; to learn the Scriptures with the head and mind, so that the heart might be warmed and moved to action.¹³

à Brakel knew that the growing and fruitful Christian was a watchful Christian. The growing Christian is watchful and careful and prayerful and circumspect, all in dependence upon the Lord's grace and strength.¹⁴ In Volumes three and four of *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, à Brakel arranges topically the biblical truths or topics of sanctification and holiness.¹⁵ He teaches what sanctification and holiness mean in our being separated and consecrated to God in our union with Jesus Christ by virtue of the Covenant of Grace. à Brakel teaches on God's law quite exhaustively, because he understood this was God's revealed will for the believer to grow in grace by keeping God's commandments.¹⁶ The believer is saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, but the true believer in both the Old and New Covenants loves God's commandments, and delights in them (Eph. 2:8-10; Titus 2:11-14; cf. Deut. 6:2; 8:11; Psalm 119:10, 19, 35, 47-48; 1 Cor. 7:19). Truly regenerated souls will love the will of God's commands, will offer themselves wholly to the Lord to do His will, submitting

¹³ It has been said about à Brakel's pastoral-systematic theology that it is difficult to find a better book on what sanctification and Christian spirituality from a Biblical-Reformed perspective looks like (Class notes, Prof. Elshout, Sept. 12, 2014).

¹⁴ Although we are to watch and pray, and to seek to actively cooperate with the Spirit in our sanctification, it is important for us to remember that anything we have received, any progress we make, is because of the work of God in us (Phil. 2:12-13; 1 Cor. 4:7). We are to work out our salvation with "fear and trembling" but ultimately it is God working in us to make us holy. We must emphasize both! As Paul teaches in Philippians 2:12-13: "*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*"

¹⁵ It is important to note à Brakel's important pastoral emphasis on sanctification and growing in holiness; About 65% of his four volume work is dedicated and focus on the application of salvation, demonstrating his interest on focusing his magnum opus on this important, yet sometimes neglected part of the believer's life.

¹⁶ "One who seeks to be holy has a great love for [God's] Law." à Brakel, Vol. III, 21.

himself in love to God, and prepared to walk in the way of God's commandments. The believers' entire walk will be focused on the will of God, because there is a love for God.¹⁷

After his biblical and practical exposition of the Law of God, à Brakel focuses on some familiar topics of other Reformed fathers, such as profession of Christ and His truth, self-denial, and prayer, particularly the Lord's Prayer.¹⁸ Then à Brakel adds his own unique touch in the way he focuses on the less familiar topics in a pastoral-systematic theology as spiritual strength or courage, contentment, patience, uprightness, fasting, watchfulness, solitude, spiritual meditation, and singing.¹⁹ This separate focus on distinct aspects of biblical spirituality reveals how much à Brakel was concerned with helping the Christian to grow in specific ways of godliness so that we might flourish in this life, and enjoy eternal felicity and blissful existence with Christ in the next! à Brakel included watchfulness along with other Christian acts of piety that strengthen believers such as prayer, solitude, fasting, and meditation upon Scripture. These acts of piety, by God's grace, accomplish our call to put to death our sins, but also to quicken us to live for God in all righteousness. We shall look later at how à Brakel beautifully and biblically brings these all together. What is watchfulness as a characteristic of the sanctified Christian life?

¹⁷ à Brakel, *Christian's Reasonable Service*, epub [Kindle location 4045-4054, Chap. 3 'The Essence of God'].

¹⁸ See also Calvin's *Institutes*, Book III.

¹⁹ à Brakel, Vols. III-IV.

Spiritual Watchfulness

A Work of the Holy Spirit

à Brakel wrote that “Spiritual watchfulness consists in watching over the soul in a careful and circumspect manner in order that no evil may befall her.”²⁰ We must understand that the Christian has many enemies within, above and around that she must be aware of. In our union with Christ by faith, we have the spiritual resources that we need to be watchful and to grow in grace. à Brakel demonstrated that one of the blessed privileges and graces of our union with Christ is that we have the ability to be on our guard against all kinds of dangers, and to keep our focus on Jesus Christ, our Lord and Pioneer in this wilderness and to endure until the end where we shall meet our Lord face to face. Being careful is what characterizes a holy Christian; à Brakel wrote:

“[The sanctified Christian] is careful in all her actions, and, since she still has the old man within her, is on her guard and readily engages in spiritual warfare, with faith and hope anticipating the crown of life. All her virtuous dispositions and exercises issue forth in a godly clarity, purity, and luster; and this is holiness.”²¹

Spiritual watchfulness pertains to the “spiritual influences of the Holy Spirit, such as light, comfort, and strength—whereby the spiritual life of the soul is strengthened.”²² As part of the glorious completed work of Christ for sinners, Christ in his exaltation has poured out His Spirit on His people. The Holy Spirit has been given to believers to aid us in following after Christ. à Brakel emphasized both the work of Jesus Christ by the Spirit and the example we have in Christ for help to us by His Spirit in our own watchfulness.

²⁰ à Brakel, Vol. IV, 11.

²¹ à Brakel, *ibid.* epub [Kindle Location 27871-80, Chap. 44, Sanctification and Holiness].

²² à Brakel, Vol. IV, 12.

As we cooperate with the Spirit's work within us, primarily through the Word of God, our souls are strengthened, and we can have greater light, comfort and strength to live for Christ in this present age in the wilderness. By the Spirit, we can see with eyes of faith the loveliness and beauty of the life Christ lived, and we will desire to live that life as His disciples, too. In every way, the Spirit of God desires to woo us to the Lord Jesus Christ, and to live life in the way that He lived.

Watching the Savior

The Spirit's main ministry is to focus a believer's faith upon Christ the Savior. This is true especially true in our sanctification, or growing in holiness (John 14-16; cf. 2 Cor. 3:18). Our Lord Jesus Christ was described prophetically in the Old Covenant in Isaiah as one who is awakened each morning to hear God's Word and learn from God (Isaiah 50:4). Through His earthly ministry, Jesus demonstrated the wisdom and beauty of being alert and watchful daily in order to listen and learn from God and to be on His watch against evil.

Jesus is first our Savior from sin, but He is also our example in the Christian life.²³ Christ is the one who has merited a perfect record before God as one like us, yet without sin (Heb. 2:14-18). The Eternal Son of God took our nature to do in our nature what we could not do, and undo what we had sinfully done against God in His great holiness and love toward mankind. Christ is our unique Mediator and Savior between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5), who uniquely could uphold God's perfect righteousness and justice, and propitiate God's just wrath so that we could be justified (Rom. 3:24-26), yet

²³ à Brakel, *ibid.* epub [Kindle Location 38721-40, Chap. 76, Watchfulness].

Jesus is also given to us as an example to follow. As God's people, we should seek to stir ourselves up with watchfulness and diligence to look on the glory of Jesus Christ as He is revealed as the most holy and careful, and thus watchful man who ever lived.²⁴

The Spirit teaches us that Christ is an example to believers in that He is the truly watchful man; Christ exemplifies spiritual watchfulness, and walking wisely with circumspection in this world. Jesus endured the cross (Heb. 12:2) for the joy that was set before Him, and the author of the Hebrews says to set our eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfector of our Faith. Jesus is the man of faith *par excellence* who went before us, keeping His eyes on the Father at all times, and in full dependence upon the Holy Spirit in order to endure to the end. Believers are to do the same. The Apostle John writes "*Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked*" (1 John 2:6), and Jesus walked watchfully, carefully, prayerfully, circumspectly. The Apostle Peter teaches us this very clearly in his first letter:

"For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps" (1 Peter 2:21).

Our Lord Jesus Christ shows us the importance of watchfulness, but He was without sin. As believers in this world we are still tainted by sin, and have not been perfected yet (Phil. 1:6; 3:12-16), but we should be maturing in our sanctification, and therefore we are to seek to be watchful in our lives.

²⁴ John Owen, *Meditations and Discourses on the Glory of Christ, Works, Vol. I* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2008), 304.

Knowing the Dangers of the Christian Life in the Wilderness

Watching Carefully: Indwelling Corruption

True believers who are growing in sanctification and are defined scripturally as righteous or upright in their character understand their daily need to be watchful and to do battle against their indwelling sins. The believer knows the value of preserving his spiritual life given to him by God in the soul, and is acquainted with his enemies and their activities. The watchful Christian takes care that the soul is not injured, and that it is circumspect and always on guard against dangers approaching. The watchful Christian seeks to be alert, and ready, and standing strong in Christ with weapons ready for battle at all times.²⁵ A watchful Christian is on guard against flesh, indwelling corruption, and sins that so easily beset them. They heed the Apostle Peter's warning:

"Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul" (1 Peter 2:11).²⁶

One way to always be prepared and watchful is knowing that the sin that still remains in the believer is a constant threat. Growing believers are concerned about this, since they mistrust their hearts and become conscious of their corrupt impulses evil desires. They desire to please their Heavenly Father, and are on watch either in public and private that their sins do not offend His holy heart. These watchful and maturing believers bring their heart before the Lord and pray, *'Search me, O God, and know my heart...'* (Psalm 139). à Brakel wrote:

²⁵ à Brakel, *Christian's Reasonable Service*, epub [Kindle Location, 38634-44, Chap. 76. Watchfulness].

²⁶ à Brakel, epub [Kindle Location, 38665. Chap. 76, Watchfulness].

“[The watchful and growing Christian] is concerned [about their sins against God]; they make no exception whatsoever. Regardless of whether they fall more into the one sin than the other, it is nevertheless contrary to their intent and the wishes of their heart; it grieves them. Yes, in secret they are much more upright than they are in the presence of men, and their heart is even more upright in principle than it is in its manifestation...these matters are true evidences of uprightness.”²⁷

Especially in private, the watchful Christian is seeking to be careful against indwelling corruption, and guarding against temptations to sin and offend their Heavenly Father. An upright and sanctified disposition is particularly a watchful disposition. Upright, true believers are willing to acknowledge their remaining corruption and seek for sincerity and truthfulness from the heart (1 Tim. 1:5). The upright believer acknowledges their impotence and powerlessness apart from the Holy Spirit; As Jesus reminded believers: *“Apart from me you can do nothing”* (John 15:5). The upright believer pays careful attention to one’s own heart, and when there is insincerity, they grieve over it and confess it. The upright believer remains in continual acknowledgment of walking ‘coram Deo’ or in the presence of God.²⁸

Christians can so easily fall into hard-heartedness and temptations to pride and hypocrisy. Hebrews 3:8 warns all believers to be cautious of unbelief that leads to hard-hearts. *“...Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness...”*. The old nature in the redeemed soul still strives to sin and gain strength. The old man or old nature gains strength in the soul primarily through recklessness and carelessness in the Christian. *“A person will bring himself into situations, knowing from*

²⁷ À Brakel, Vol. III, 435-36.

²⁸ À Brakel, Vol. III, 441.

experience that they have repeatedly ensnared him,”²⁹ and thus it is important to be watchful in our daily walk. The old nature is always engaged in keeping man from doing what is good. The new nature in contrast, is infused with the blessed Holy Spirit, and it is watchful against sin. Sin robs the soul of nourishment and opportunity, and the converted, watchful soul has learned to which sin her nature is most inclined and which circumstances will cause sin to arise the most, as well as render it strength.³⁰

As growing Christians we desire to love God from our hearts and so we must be aware of our thoughts, our intentions, our affections as well as our actions. It is important to remember that all of our actions result from inward thoughts, motives, intentions, and affections of the heart. If we are to truly change as Christians, we must do more than try to behave better externally. We must have a heart change—a transforming work of the Spirit. We must ask the Holy Spirit to forgive us of our remaining sins, and the wickedness we still get glimpses of in our thoughts, intentions and affections. In being able by God’s Spirit to see the frightening sinfulness still remaining in the believer’s thought-life, one is humbled, and able to pray for greater help and is encouraged to deeper dependence upon Jesus. à Brakel, in his excellent section on the Lord’s Prayer, applying his thoughts to *“Lead us not into temptation, but delivers us from evil,”* wrote:

*“What is implied when the godly pray: ‘Lead us not into temptation’?
...The petition is as follows: ‘Neither let the temptation get a hold of nor
have power over us; do not withdraw Thy Holy Spirit from us; do not give
us over to ourselves when opportunities for sin manifest themselves.*

²⁹ à Brakel, Vol. III, 9-10.

³⁰ à Brakel, Vol. III, 13.

When the enemies assault us and seek to toss us to and fro and to sift us as wheat, let us then not be overpowered by the temptation. Do not let us be ensnared so that unrighteousness would gain the upper hand; neither give us over to evil inclinations nor to the lusts of the corrupt heart...³¹

It is also important to note, that while à Brakel warns us against our indwelling sin, and the importance of being watchful over our hearts, he also teaches us that sin no longer has dominion over us. Christ Jesus has not only died in our place as our substitutionary atonement to take away our sins, but He has died and risen again to give us victory over our sins. Let us be encouraged by à Brakel's pastoral admonishment:

"Time and again [in the Christian walk, no matter how many times one stumbles] there is a new resolve to do battle against sin; there is prayer for strength, and, desiring to be strengthened, there is a receiving of Jesus by faith unto sanctification. The godly fear that sin may take them by surprise and thus they seek to be watchful....Sin has no dominion when this union results in delight, a love for, and a desire to do whatever pleases the Lord."³²

We are by nature drowsy concerning spiritual matters; this is part of our remaining corruption.³³ Like the Laodiceans in Revelation 3, we often think as Christians we can see better than we truly can. We can easily be deceived into thinking, like the Church at Laodicea that we are rich, have prospered, and that we have need of nothing (Rev. 3:17), while we are living lukewarm before the Lord, and in need of repentance (Rev. 3:18-20). Thank God for the kind repentance that our Lord Jesus calls His people to on a daily basis. But in order to seek daily repentance, we must be watchful and careful in our Christian lives.

³¹ à Brakel, Vol. III, 580-81.

³² à Brakel, Vol. I, 399.

³³ à Brakel, *ibid*, 13.

In our Lord's longest discourse recorded in Mark 13, Jesus tells the disciples about the imminent return of the Lord and the glorious coming of the Son of Man. He tells them to "be watchful" and to "be alert". The command that is translated "be alert" could actually be literally translated as "hunt for sleepiness" in your lives!

"Therefore stay awake- for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the cock crows, or in the morning- ³⁶ lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake." (Mark 13:35-37).

The Lord Jesus is aware of our need as His disciples to know our tendency toward drowsiness, and to be apathetically sleeping when we need to be waiting and watching. The entire Parable of the Ten Virgins in Matthew 25:1-13 is about being alert, and ready for the Master to return, and to be cautious about growing sleepy or drowsy in the Christian life. The Master said cautiously:

"While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept" (Matt. 25:5).³⁴

Christians must be ever watchful against carelessness because of our indwelling sin in our own hearts (Prov. 4:23). The unconverted person is foolish, and not concerned about how they spend their life, their time, and they are by nature spiritually drowsy and careless. They are like the foolish virgins who are unprepared and the foolish builder who does not build on the rock (Matt. 7:26).³⁵ But the growing, spiritually wise and honest upright believer prays this prayer to God, knowing that His heart can be self-deceptive, and who can know a deceptive heart (Jer. 17:9-10)?

³⁴ à Brakel, *ibid.* epub [Kindle Location, 38665-73].

³⁵ à Brakel, Vol. IV, 133.

*“Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!
And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way
everlasting!” (Psa. 139:23-24).*

Believers know that one of the most dangerous enemies of the Christian life is one’s self, one’s own heart! à Brakel wrote:

“We carry the seed of uncleanness within, which will very readily shoot up if we do not carefully watch against this. Happy is he who has a true heart of a virgin, for when this sin takes hold, it cannot very easily be driven out. Therefore, watch!”³⁶

Christians must also be wise in seeking others who will be alert and watchful with you, and to awaken you if you fall asleep in warfare. Be busy in serving Christ and others. à Brakel practically teaches believers how to be watchful in a very helpful and pastoral way. He reminds believers to be moderate and sober, and cautious about how much one eats or drinks. One who excessively eats or drinks too much cannot be watchful. He counsels to seek others who will hold them accountable and help them to watch out for sin, and be willing to awaken them if they see that they are slumbering spiritually. Finally, the wise and watchful believer will seek to be busy doing the Lord’s will, and working in their vocation, awaiting the return of Jesus. As Matthew 24:42 and 46 teaches:

“Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming....Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes.”

³⁶ à Brakel, Vol. III, 212.

Watching Vigilantly: The Devil Who Seeks to Destroy

The enemies of our soul are never-ceasing and tireless in their temptations and taunts.³⁷ The enemies are alert and are tireless in the execution of their assaults even when we are not. Our spiritual enemies are relentless, and will never lose a bit of sleep seeking to undo the believer. We must always be careful and watchful!³⁸ The devil actually watches us to see when we are being careless. We must never imagine that we have already fully overcome him in this life. à Brakel wrote: “Do not imagine that the enemy has already disappeared, for he lies in wait for you.”³⁹ The watchful Christian therefore understands that there is a constant danger from our enemy, the devil. As the Bible teaches:

“Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

The devil is called the “adversary” (*antidikos*) because he opposes, resists and contradicts believers, opposing all the good that God is pleased to do in and for the believer.⁴⁰ In addition to being called the “adversary”, the devil is also called the “tempter” (Matt. 4:3), and the “wicked one” (Matt. 13:19) because he seeks to cause fallings and spiritual failure to believers through temptations (as he did to our Lord before us), and he has nothing but evil and wickedness in mind as an end goal in his ongoing assault. The devil assaults believers because God has put enmity between him and the woman, and between her seed (who is ultimately Christ and His people) and his

³⁷ à Brakel, *ibid.*

³⁸ à Brakel, *ibid.* epub [Kindle Location, 38665-73].

³⁹ à Brakel, *ibid.* epub [Kindle Location, 33895, Chap. 62, Spiritual Strength or Courage].

⁴⁰ à Brakel, *ibid.* epub [Kindle Location, 7380, Chap. 9, Angels and Devils].

seed (Gen. 3:15). There is a real conflict, a heavenly war that is raging around us. We know confidently that the Lord Jesus has struck the definitive blow against the ancient serpent, but he still is on the rampage against believers because he knows his time is short.⁴¹ As the Bible teaches:

And the great dragon was cast down, the old serpent, he that is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world; he was cast down to the earth, and his angels were cast down with him. ¹⁰ And I heard a great voice in heaven, saying, Now is come the salvation, and the power, and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, who accuseth them before our God day and night ...Woe for the earth and for the sea: because the devil is gone down unto you, having great wrath, knowing that he hath but a short time" (Rev. 12:9-10, 12b).

We must be constantly watchful against enemies "above" or personal, wicked spiritual beings, and enemies of all good who are called in Scripture the "devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). The Bible tells us to be watchful against the Devil and his schemes or wiles or tricks (2 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 6:11). So vicious is this adversary, that we need to be prepared for the fact that at the moment one is inclined to repent and turn to Jesus, the devil will exert himself with a vengeance. à Brakel wrote:

*"[If the devil cannot prevent you from repenting] he will endeavor to torment and trouble you, and thus keep you from living a holy and joyful life. Therefore, from your side you are also to exert yourself fully, Gird yourself with strength and resist him courageously."*⁴²

à Brakel lists three primary ways of Satan's assaults on believers that we should be aware of. He wrote that the methods of Satan's assaults are manifold, but there are

⁴¹ à Brakel, *ibid.* epub [Kindle Location, 42586-99, Chap. 95, Assaults of Satan].

⁴² à Brakel, *ibid.* epub [Kindle Location 42599-609, Chap. 95, Assaults of Satan].

three primary ways we can learn to be watchful. Sometimes the devil's activity is focused upon man's five senses. He does so either by impeding their function while simultaneously stimulating the imagination—whereby a person is of the opinion to have truly seen those things—or his presence is audibly or visibly perceived due to a physical appearance. Sometimes the devil only stimulates the imagination, be it when man is either awake or is dreaming—during daylight or darkness. Sometimes he operates by speaking directly to the soul, which is all the more evident when he presents nonphysical matters and arguments to the soul.”⁴³ Note in à Brakel's wisdom about the evil one, the way the devil seeks to use fear to cause God's people to stumble and mistrust Him! We must be especially watchful and constantly on our guard against fears of all kinds. It is interesting to note that of all of God's commands in Holy Scripture, the command to “Fear not” is the most frequently spoken to God's people. What an encouragement to us in our fears, and what a revelation of how God our Heavenly Father, knows us so well, and knows how easily we slip into fearfulness.⁴⁴

Fearfulness may be a weakness; it can be a great temptation to unbelief and doubt for a lot of Christians. It is important to note that the devil will focus his temptations upon where the believer is weak. If the believer is vulnerable to fear, then he will be taught and tormented to hinder their faith in God's goodness and kindness. à Brakel wrote about the devil's knowledge of our weaknesses:

⁴³ à Brakel, Vol. I, 301.

⁴⁴ See also à Brakel, *ibid.* epub. [Kindle Locations 42134-44, Chap. 94, Unbelief Concerning One's Spiritual State, and 26141-60, Chap. 42, The Life of Faith in Reference to the Promises].

“He knows the constitution of the body as well as its vulnerability; he knows the sin most likely to be committed, and he knows in what circumstances we must at all times be to do so. Along with this he interjects thoughts and mental images in our imagination whereby he endeavors to make us think about such thoughts, stimulating our lusts by such reflections.”⁴⁵

All the evil one can do is to suggest, entice, and create situations, but we must be watchful and on guard against His evil schemes!⁴⁶ We are to overcome the evil one by being much in prayer, by leaning upon and depending upon Jesus’ strength in our weakness. We are to look to Christ by eyes of faith, and behold the Lamb of God, and the Strong Savior for Sinners in the conflict. We are to pray and then wait upon Him for our deliverance; He is faithful.⁴⁷ Though we are watchful, we need never fear our enemies.⁴⁸ We are more than overcomers through Him who loved us! It is so very comforting to know that our Lord Jesus Christ has conquered evil for us, and He is with us!

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:35-39).

⁴⁵ à Brakel, Vol. III, 577-78.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ à Brakel, Vol. IV, 247.

⁴⁸ à Brakel, *ibid.*

Although we are more than conquerors through our Lord Jesus, let us remember as those who seek to be watchful that the devil is subtle and cruel, and he is tireless in his seeking to rob us of our joy, and harm and hinder us from following spiritually after the Lord Jesus. àBrakel wrote boldly to encourage us, and to equip us against this hostile enemy to let this arouse our hatred against him, and remember he is a conquered enemy, and therefore our victory in Christ is certain. Jesus, our Lord, has spoiled principalities and powers, and made a show of them openly, and has triumphed over them by way of the cross (Col. 2:15). Let us stay close to Jesus and put on the full armor of God “*watching with all perseverance*” (Eph. 6:13-18).⁴⁹

Physical Watchfulness

à Brakel, in his stirring and deeply biblical and experiential theology, made a distinction between spiritual watchfulness and physical watchfulness, both of which are related. Physical watchfulness is defined by à Brakel as “depriving one’s self of sleep at a time which is designated for sleep.”⁵⁰ While spiritual watchfulness is focused on cultivating a certain attitude of circumspection in our daily walk, physical watchfulness is taking specific times and seasons normally dedicated to sleep to stay awake and alert for spiritual exercises such as meditation upon God’s Word, solitude, prayer and fasting.

The distinction between spiritual and physical watchfulness could be compared to prayer. We should live each day having a prayerful attitude. We should understand in each moment that we live before God, and can offer up conversation to Him, requests,

⁴⁹ à Brakel, *ibid.* epub [Kindle Location 42850-79, Chap. 95, Assaults of Satan].

⁵⁰ à Brakel, *ibid.*

and speak to Him of our love; this is a prayerful attitude, and way of living. But there are times set apart specifically for prayer. These are times when we are physically and spiritually seeking God without distractions, and intent upon speaking to God concerning our requests. Spiritual watchfulness, like a prayerful life, is an ongoing attitude and discipline of the heart and mind. Physical watchfulness, like times of prayer, is to set apart some season or time period to engage in watchful concerning certain dangers that are threatening the Christian's life, such as times of persecution, suffering, death, or sins that are easily causing trouble in one's life. As much as possible, physical watchfulness (as well as much of spiritual watchfulness) should be done privately before God, not allowing others to know that we are engaged in it. As our Lord teaches in Matthew 6 about praying, fasting and giving, physical watchfulness would fall principally into the same category of religious exercises whereby we need to be careful not to be showing, and self-righteous.⁵¹

Four Important Types of Watchfulness

There are four main types of watchfulness that à Brakel focuses upon throughout His excellent pastoral-systematic, theological work that can aid in our sanctification as Christians. These four types are similar, but should be understood distinctly. They are: (1) *Watching...and praying*; (2) *Watching...and waiting*; (3) *Watching...and meditation*; and (4) *Watching...God's providence*. Watchfulness, whether spiritual or physical, should always be accompanied by the spiritual exercises of seeking after God by means

⁵¹ à Brakel, *ibid.* epub [Kindle Location 38723, Chap. 76, Watchfulness].

of prayer, reading and meditation on Scripture.⁵² à Brakel teaches how these exercises can cultivate a tender heart in the redeemed soul that is characterized by watchfulness and spiritual wrestling. The following are four very specific ways to keep us alert in our daily Christian walk, and to utterly depend upon our Risen Jesus as our hope and help in each moment that we live.

Watching and Praying

We are to watch and pray. Watchful praying and a prayerful watchfulness is necessary to be a fruitful and growing Christian.⁵³ à Brakel wrote:

“It is a watchful praying and a prayerful watchfulness; they mutually stimulate each other....By way of prayerful watchfulness and watchful prayer, the body (which yields much opportunity for sin and stimulates us toward sin) is subdued and rendered more useful.”

Watching and praying is a specific way our Lord Jesus lived successfully before God. We should remember that although our Lord Jesus was not tainted by our sin, and so He never sinned, nevertheless, He was a true man, who struggled with real temptations, just like us (Matt. 4; Heb. 2:14-18; 4:14-16), and therefore He lived the watchful life. Our Lord Jesus depended upon prayer to make Him complete in the Father’s work (Heb. 5:7-10). Complete does not mean in any way imperfect as in sinful, but that the Lord Jesus had to grow and mature as a man, and He did so as a particularly watchful man through prayer.

⁵² à Brakel, Vol. IV., 15-16.

⁵³ à Brakel, Vol. IV, 15-16.

In order to accomplish His mission for our salvation, our Lord Jesus would arise before dawn to commune with the Father in prayer so that He would be watchful and careful in the exercise of His ministry for sinners. We are taught

“And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed” (Mark 1:35)

and

“In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God” (Luke 6:12).

What a glorious picture of our Savior, the God Man, on bended knee, displaying the wisdom and privilege of watchfulness and prayer for the Christian life. What a life of dependence upon God’s Spirit, so that He would have the strength to accomplish all that work that we could never do, and to resist all the temptations of the evil one that we could never resist. This is how we ought to live each day as those who are wise and watchful!

If the Eternal Son of God permanently united to our human nature depended prayerfully and watchfully upon God, how much more must we be cautious and careful!? We are to be reminded that the same Holy Spirit who aided the Lord Jesus in His spiritual growth as a true man, also has been given to us, His people, so that we too, may make real progress in reliance upon His grace. As disciple-followers of Jesus Christ our Savior, we are not to follow Jesus from afar like Peter at the time of Jesus’s betrayal, but very closely, seeking to keep in step with the Spirit as He did! (cf. Gal. 5:16, 25).

When Jesus addressed his weak and tired disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane as He was going the way of suffering for them, he joined these two important acts of spirituality together. Let no man put them asunder. Prayer is simply communion with God, and dependence upon God. Prayer is an offering up to God of our requests in Christ's Name, and according to God's will, to our Heavenly Father, in reliance upon and assistance from the Holy Spirit. To pray is to be dependent, and it activates a certain watchfulness in us.

Watchfulness is often tied to prayer. The Apostle Paul wrote:

*“Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving”
(Col. 4:2).*

Our prayer life, because it is focused on God the Father in Christ, in reliance upon the Holy Spirit, causes us to be aware of our ongoing and constant dependence upon God's grace, power and help in order for us to be fruitful.⁵⁴ As Jesus teaches in John's Gospel, we must “abide in Him,” or “remain in Him” resting, depending, trusting, being uplifted and strengthened by His grace. In reliance upon the strength and infallible promises of God, ‘Be strong and of good courage’ (Josh. 1:6).⁵⁵ Thus prayer and watchfulness must go together. As we pray and then are able to be more constant and faithful and precise in our watchfulness, so the more we watch and the more we see of the dangers above, within, and around us, the more we will know our need for prayer.

⁵⁴ à Brakel, Vol. III, 444-481.

⁵⁵ à Brakel, *ibid.* epub [Kindle Location 33897-906, Chap. 62, Spiritual Strength and Courage].

Watching with prayer doesn't mean that we will necessarily see the answers to our prayers immediately, but we will begin to see immediately what we need, and more desperately than before. Prayer also gives us much joy and will greatly increase our love for God. À Brakel wrote about one of the great blessings of a healthy prayer life is:

“Having a ravished and radiant soul that desires to seek after God with holy longings, and to ask and seek as an enjoyable end in itself, knowing that God makes us to see more clearly how much we need Him and what He has done for us.”⁵⁶

Watching and Waiting

Watching and waiting also go together. As we learn in Psalm 5:3,

“O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch.”

Note how the Psalmist prayed, then watched to see how God would answer his request; the word watch, translated here by ESV has the idea of “looking out to see” with anticipation for God’s answer (see Hab. 2:1). In watching, there was an expectant waiting for God to answer his prayer. The prophet Habakkuk sought God as a watchman, to “see what God would say to him” in response to his prayerful dialog and concerns he had addressed to God:

“I will take my stand at my watchpost and station myself on the tower, and look out to see what he will say to me, and what I will answer concerning my complaint” (Hab. 2:1).

⁵⁶ See section on “Exhortations to Prayer”, à Brakel, Vol. III, 468ff.

It was not a literal watchpost that Habakkuk climbed up upon to see, but was a metaphor for his watchful waiting upon God, expectantly hoping, and looking intently for God's answer.

The Prophet Micah also displayed this watchful and waiting attitude as he said hopefully and confidently:

“Therefore, I will look unto the Lord; I will wait upon the God of my salvation; my God will hear me” (Micah 7:7).

The watchful Christian is hopefully awaiting his prayers to be answered, but also all of the promises of God to be fulfilled in the return of Jesus Christ, and the restoration of all creation!

Watching waits on answered prayer, but watching is also awaiting the return of the Lord Jesus. The watchful Christian cries out with the saints: *“Maranatha!” “Come, Lord Jesus!”* (Rev. 22:17-20). The Psalmist speaks of the importance of waiting on God, with an eager watchfulness:

“Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!” (Psalm 27:14).

This waiting described here is not a waiting passively, without doing anything but an eager, expectant, enduring dependency upon God by faith.

This spiritually healthy kind of watching with waiting, directs the focus of the soul upon on heavenly things and realities (Col. 3:1-4). As the Apostle Paul says of watching and waiting through the suffering in this present age:

“And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:23).

Waiting eagerly here is for the fulfillment of all of the redemption that has been graciously purchased for us by Jesus Christ, and experiencing the full manifestation of that love of Christ toward us when He returns.

Watching and waiting helps us not to put our hopes in temporal, impermanent things of this present age that are passing away (1 John 2:17; cf. Heb. 12:26-29). As à Brakel wrote concerning carelessness in waiting upon the Lord’s return:

“In your mind [the reason why you’re careless in the way you live in light of the reality of Jesus’s return] you remain too attached to the earthly, and with Peter, you would wish to erect tabernacles here to find pleasure for soul and body. Therefore, you reflect so little about the future—as if that were not desirable. If you do not reflect much upon that great and glorious day, nor deem this to be your comfort, joy, and glory; if you do not comfort others with those words, then it is no wonder that you neither have high thoughts of it nor much desire for it.”⁵⁷

The spiritually growing Christian is the watching and waiting Christian who is not surprised by the return of Christ, but has been eagerly anticipating it. He is not “caught unawares” but has girded up his loins watchfully, and has plenty of oil in his lamp (Luke 12:35), and looks forward to meeting the Bridegroom face to face! Our Lord Jesus reminds us all:

“But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man” (Luke 21:36).

⁵⁷ à Brakel, *ibid.* epub [Kindle Location 44760-70, Chap. 70, Concerning the Last Judgment].

Let us be watching and waiting for Him when He returns!

Watching and Meditation

Watching and meditation also go together. We are to meditate upon God's promises in order to be reminded of the grace and power that God has provided for believers in the Covenant of Grace in union with Jesus Christ! What great privileges we have, as well as great gospel warnings that remind us of the constant dangers in this present age. Meditation upon Scripture helps us to remember that God's Word is a light to our feet and a lamp to our path (Psa. 119:105) as we walk circumspectly and cautiously in this world. We need more than Biblical information or the mere knowledge of Scripture, these truths of God must penetrate our hearts, and give us real wisdom so that we can live prayerfully, carefully, and wisely in the wilderness of this present age.

“See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise,¹⁶ Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.¹⁷ Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.” (Eph. 5:15-17, KJV).⁵⁸

The Word is to make us wise through filling our minds with it, meditating upon it, saturating our hearts with His love, and this biblical practice will make us watchful and wise. We are to have an understanding of the will of the Lord. We are to grow in wisdom through the Word, and we are to redeem the time by knowing the difference between what is good, and what is the best. This comes from meditation upon God's Word.

⁵⁸ Circumspect from Greek word *akribos*. à Brakel notes that in our language this is indicative of seeing ahead, or of being prudent, wise and using discretion. à Brakel, Vol. IV, 129.

Watching with meditation is concerned with not only be on guard against threats and attacks from within and without, but it is concerned with getting the truth of Scripture down deeply in one's heart through the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit. The truth must change us, affect us, cause us to love God more, and to love the things of God more. Believers through watching and meditation will learn to love what God loves, and to hate what God hates more intently. Watching with meditation on God's Holy Word, with the help of the Holy Spirit will help us to know the love of God that surpasses knowledge in its depth, breadth, length and height (Eph. 3:17-19). This meditation through the Spirit gives us not only an understanding of spiritual realities, but helps us to taste them, desiring them deeply with all that we have.

Watching and meditation is to be forearmed against future assaults of sin and the evil one by giving you such a taste of the love of God toward you, that you are more resolved not to sin against such a kind, compassionate and loving God. à Brakel wrote about this desiring after God and not desiring to offend him through spiritual meditation:

"[The one who meditates spiritually] knows God and has a desire after God; this is the reason why his heart is repeatedly drawn to God. It was so sweet and delightful to him to have seen and tasted something of God that he could not forget it. Time and again it comes to mind and he desires to experience this again in a greater measure. Such meditation gives this experience a new sense of sweetness and stirs up his desires."⁵⁹

Through watching and meditation, the believer's desires are being changed to become more holy, and so one has less of an appreciation for some of the sins that

⁵⁹ à Brakel, *ibid.* epub [Kindle Location 38890-900, Chap. 78, Spiritual Meditation].

formerly tempted and delighted her, and now there is more of a hatred for them, especially as she sees the sin as more clearly an affront to a holy and glorious God who she loves deeply in Christ. There is much profit in watching and meditation. It is to receive a foretaste of heaven, and to be changed into Christ's image; it is one of the greater blessings of the Christian life!⁶⁰

Watching and mediation makes you desire to serve Christ more watchfully. You desire to be watchful not merely on a theoretical level, or even on just bare obedience as a duty to a command, but now you want to watch, because you have tasted in your heart of hearts that this is what you must do in order to please God and to endure to the end—and this is what matters most to you—to glorify God in your life, and to endure to the end, and to see you holy Lord in His glory face to face! Hallelujah! (John 17:24; 1 John 3:2). Watching and meditation will lift your heart on high, where Christ is seated at God's right hand and cause your heart and soul to soar on the heights, as Colossians 3:1-4 teaches us:

"If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. ³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."

Watching God's Providence

A final way that is profitable for the believer to grow in Christ, is to be watchful of God's providence. This is a focus on seeing God's generous and kind hand in your day to

⁶⁰ à Brakel, *ibid.* epub [Kindle Location 38956, Chap.78, Spiritual Meditation].

day life that will cause you to not ever want to sin against Him, but to encourage you to thanksgiving and deep gratefulness. As Christians, we know and confess that God is Spirit and invisible, and we cannot see Him, but let us look by faith to perceive His generous hand extended to us in this world through secondary causes.⁶¹

Watching God's providence helps us to see our Father's kind and strong hand each of our days as we walk faithfully with Him in this world. à Brakel encourages believers to "look beyond the secondary causes and see my Heavenly Father."⁶² He wrote more fully:

*"Accustom yourself by frequent meditations, attentive observation, and diligent exercises to believably observe God's hand in all things. As you would observe the rays of the sun entering a room through a window, observe His preservation, cooperation, and government, concerning both creatures and their activity. Accustom yourself continually to discern God's active hand....All...things, from the least to the greatest, are under God's control...May you...continually perceive God's hand working in and by secondary causes in such a manner as if these causes did not exist...to see God at work."*⁶³

Advantages of Watchfulness in Scripture

Confidence before and in God

Believers are often exhorted to be watchful in Holy Scripture as à Brakel demonstrated through his pastoral-systematic work. The Apostle Paul's final words to the Christians at Corinth are to "Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be

⁶¹ à Brakel, Vol. I, 349.

⁶² à Brakel, *ibid.*

⁶³ à Brakel, *ibid.*, Vol. I, pgs. 349-50.

strong" (1 Cor. 16:13). A very important spiritual pillar of the Christian life is watchfulness and this gives us a confidence in God.

Watchfulness develops a tremendous confidence in God and His strength as he watches over the believer. *"O my Strength, I will watch for you, for you, O God, are my fortress"* (Psalm 59:9). Although we are very weak, we can be sure that in our weakness we can be made strong, and that His grace is sufficient in that in His provision for us, when we are weak, then we are strong. As the Apostle Paul teaches us the paradoxical and yet faithful way that God gives strength to believers:

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰ For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

As we grow in watchfulness, we will also grow in our confidence that God is able to do all things for us as He has promised.

Confidence in Prayer

Watchfulness is tied to prayer and meditation, and has an expectancy that God will do good toward His people:

"O LORD, in the morning you hear my voice; in the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch" (Psalm 5:3).

As we grow in our watchfulness as Christians, because we pray expectantly, we shall also better see the way God answers prayers. God always answers prayer, although He doesn't always answer our prayers the way that we had hoped. God always answers

prayer in the way we would have asked Him had we had the wisdom and understanding that He has.

God is always good, and we can be confident in this. As we become more watchful, we are able to see, take note of, and be more assured that God always answers prayer, and we can learn to confess along with Father Abraham that God is “able to do what He has promised to do” (Rom. 4:19-21).

Confidence on the Day of Judgment

Our Lord Jesus particularly understood the danger of the redeemed, yet still careless disciples who would allow their weakness to cause their own peril and even tempt them to deny the Savior who loved and bought them.

“And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, “So, could you not watch with me one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.” (Matt. 26:40-41).

As we learn to hear and heed the warning words from Jesus to us, and particularly to remember our proneness to carelessness and apathy, we can grow in our confidence anticipating the day we will appear before Him on the Day of Judgment. Carelessness and apathy gives us every reason to be afraid on the last day, it calls into question our election and calling (2 Pet. 1:9-11; cf. 2 Cor. 13:5). As we grow in our watchfulness, we can grow in our confidence, and thus joy concerning the Last Day, when we shall appear before our Lord, and have nothing to be ashamed about! (2 Thess. 3:14; 2 Tim. 2:15).

Confidence in Times of Temptation

The Apostle Paul warns believers to be watchful over themselves, and the sin that still remains in their hearts ready to deceive them.

“Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted” (Gal. 6:1).

As we learn to be watchful, we can learn to be more confident in times of temptation, not being surprised by the indwelling corruption that remains inside us. If we are carefully watching our own lives, it is easier by God’s Spirit and strength to be more on guard against temptations to sin against God, and especially to be useful in times of helping others with their own sinful weaknesses.

Confidence in Ministry

The Apostle Paul taught his own disciple Timothy how important, especially as a pastor, that one keep a careful watch on himself in both life and doctrine. Note the way the Apostle Paul focuses with primacy on the pastor’s self before his doctrine, emphasizing how important we are to watch over our own hearts and lives. If our teaching is to be received by God’s people, they must see us being careful, and watchful over our own hearts. A pastor can have the truth in doctrine, and be extremely watchful in making sure all of his theology is right, but then undermine his entire ministry through carelessness and lack of watchfulness over one’s sinful and deceiving heart!

“Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim. 4:16).

Why à Brakel’s Emphasis is Needed in Today’s Church

Why do we need à Brakel’s particular contribution today so desperately? à Brakel’s unique contribution should be taught so that his helpful teaching will have an ongoing contribution and influence in Christ’s Church. In the Lord Jesus’ final hours, He told His disciples who had been with Him closely through His ministry that one of them would betray Him. The disciples’ response to this, should be considered soberly by every Christian. It ought to call us all to a closer, more holy watchfulness in Christ! None of the disciples truly know their own hearts. In fact, they ask the Lord, “*Master, is it I?*” The disciples were not sure of their own hearts. Perhaps all of them had been tempted to deny the Lord in this way; it seems so. This should make us all the more careful and watchful as Christ’s disciples now; we should all be watchfully asking: “*Master, is it I? today?*”⁶⁴

In my own ministry as a pastor over the last twelve years, I have been blessed through extremely difficult trials to see my own sinfulness and hypocrisy in my heart of hearts! I labored faithfully in God’s Word in His vineyard for the first seven years of ministry, but with an unbiblical and blind understanding of my own sins and hypocrisy! I was not watchful.

I labored publicly in the ministry, being faithful to exposit the Scriptures verse by verse, and with a Christ-centered focus and application, with no real understanding of how self-deceived I was, and without others being able to discern that I was living a careless life. I lived as a sinful hypocrite, ineffective and unproductive in my knowledge

⁶⁴ ESV **Matthew 26:22** And they were very sorrowful and began to say to him one after another, "Is it I, Lord?" ESV **Mark 14:19** They began to be sorrowful and to say to him one after another, "Is it I?"

of the Lord Jesus Christ, and living a lie that only my wife could see to a certain extent, but could not fully explain. I was faithful to God's Word externally, and had a mere head knowledge of God's Word, but did not truly have God's Word dwelling in my heart within (cf. Eph. 3:17-19), in a way that was bringing the "power of godliness" and the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in my life. I was not walking watchfully, carefully, prayerfully, circumspectly. As a minister and man, I am sad to say that I did not love prayer, did not fully appreciate God's Word (except that it was something to know and teach), nor did I walk as I should have been walking as a Christian, especially as a minister.

How many more are in the ministry today, laboring faithfully on the surface, but inside they are really full of dead men's bones? I am not sure if I was unconverted in my first few years of ministry. I thought that I had been truly converted over twenty years ago, but there was no real assurance until five years ago when I discovered how much criticism, hypocrisy, unfaithfulness, and sinfulness had been hiding in my heart without me being as aware as I should have been. How many more are living in this same way today? I would think quite a few, I imagine.

I think that à Brakel's important contribution and emphasis on watchfulness can help us to grow as Christians, and especially as ministers. Watchfulness can help us to understand experientially (as much as possible) about the great evil that still remains within us, the evil above and around us, and that we are powerless to overcome without the Holy Spirit. Watchfulness helps us emphasize just how fragile we are without the

LORD Jesus, and the great need we have for deeper dependence and acknowledgement of our dire neediness before Him!

Are You A Watchful Christian?

Are you a true and growing believer, watchful and careful and prayerful and circumspect in your life? Do you care about the honor of God, and the precious value of your soul? Do you know of the Christ who died for you, and does it grieve you deeply to grieve such a wonderful and glorious Savior?

Are you in touch with your sinful carelessness, and your temptations to spiritual apathy? Does the sins of your thought life, motivations, and love of the world cause you to repent and cry out to God for more help and the power of His Spirit?

It is very important to examine yourself to see if you be in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5). Have you truly been regenerated? Are you born again by the Holy Spirit of God and living before the face of God? Search yourself closely. You are either a child of God or a slave of satan; either a privileged and blessed heir of the Heavenly Kingdom or a depraved soul awaiting the just sentence of a holy God into everlasting hell fire and wrath. Have you asked yourself: *"Master, Is it I?!"* who perhaps denies Jesus with your life and/or your doctrine?

If we do not examine ourselves, we become careless. Are you bearing fruit for God? While your thoughts and intentions are tainted by sin, do you offer to God your works in Christ through a sincere faith, a pure heart, and a clear conscience (1 Tim. 1:5)? Are you conscious of the evils that dwell in your heart? If so, are you aware of your great need for Christ's strength, blessed love, joyful presence, and constant forgiveness?!

Remember there are many who will say to the Lord on that Day of Great Judgment: “Lord, Lord,” and Jesus will say “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of iniquity” (Matt. 7:21-23). As our Lord Jesus asks probingly of the sinners, “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord’ and not do what I tell you?” (Luke 6:46).

Let us progress in our sanctification by God’s grace, in reliance upon the work of the Holy Spirit, and because of the privileges granted to us in the Covenant of Grace by God the Father through the Eternal and Blessed Son! Let us progress in our effectiveness and fruitfulness in the Christian life for the glory of Jesus, coming to the place of enjoying joyful assurance, by making our calling and election sure (2 Pet. 1:7-11). As à Brakel wrote as a warning against carelessness and a sober admonition to watchfulness:

“Even though it is possible to come to this realization by the grace of the Holy Spirit, not every one does. Many thousands will go to hell who imagine that they will enter heaven. There will also be many, however, who will enter heaven who feared that they would not arrive there...In some true partakers of the covenant of grace there is still much darkness, so that they do not have a clear perception of what constitutes sufficient light and life...So much of the old man yet remains in them—a fact upon which they focus to such an extent that they question whether this can coexist with grace—that they live between hope and fear...Consider...how necessary it is that we scrutinize our hearts and examine ourselves as to who and how we are.”⁶⁵

“Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 1:10-11).

⁶⁵ à Brakel, Vol. II, 310.

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