

Final Instructions & Comforts

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[0 : 00] So, we come to the end of John Flavel's book, Keeping the Heart. And I want to divide this lesson into four parts.

! First, I'll address an unintentional omission from the last lesson. Second, I'll provide a bit more biographical context, which I think helps to appreciate what Flavel writes in this book. Third, Flavel offers six additional guidelines for keeping the heart, no matter the season of life. And fourth, I'll give you three comforts for struggling saints.

So, first of all, some of you noticed right away that I skipped one of Flavel's ten encouragements last time. I completely missed number nine. So, if you're taking notes, you may want to turn back and pencil in number nine, which is closer fellowship with other believers.

Closer fellowship with other believers. When we keep our hearts, not just our bodies, from sin, we avoid selfishness and pride and carnality, those things that cause division among God's people.

[1 : 26] As Flavel says, if professing believers would study, watch, and keep their hearts better, all this would be prevented.

And the beauty and glory of fellowship would again be restored. We would no longer divide, dispute, or rashly judge. If our hearts were in tune, our tongues would not jar.

How charitable, compassionate, and tender we would be to one another if we were daily humbled under the evil of our own hearts.

The Bible could hardly put it more succinctly than when it says in Psalm 133, Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity.

But, of course, if our hearts are filled with disdain or resentment or unforgiveness or pride, then that good and pleasant unity cannot exist.

[2 : 28] Well, with that, you can flip back over in your notes to a new page, and we'll begin today's lesson. So, throughout this series, I've gone back and I've learned more about John Flavel's life.

Truth be told, I didn't know that much about him when we began. And though I shared some of his story with you in a previous lesson, I'd like to share a bit more.

The primary thing I want you to know about Flavel is that he is not writing this book, keeping the heart from behind closed, comfortable doors of a study.

Not at all. You see, there are times when a minister must speak about things in a less than personal way. For example, I could speak to you about persecution.

I could tell you everything the Bible says about persecution. I could provide you real-life examples of it. But I have never personally experienced persecution.

[3 : 33] And I suspect that anything I could say about it would probably carry just a little more weight if I had experienced it. Well, Flavel did experience it.

More than that, he endured a tremendous amount of personal tragedy and hardship. These seasons he writes about in his book are seasons he knew quite well.

He had been there. He was there as he wrote these words. And that causes me to read his words a little differently. Somehow they take on a whole new meaning.

So, Flavel was raised in a Christian home. His father, Richard Flavel, was a Puritan minister. And you may remember that the Puritans emerged from the Church of England.

While the Church of England was a Protestant church, it retained a few too many Roman Catholic traditions and practices to sit well with some people.

[4 : 34] So, the Puritan movement emerged seeking to further purify the Church of England. Well, Flavel followed his father's footsteps and trained for the ministry at Oxford and was ordained in 1650.

He then went on to pastor a small church. But in 1656, he made a selfless decision to leave that church and pastor a larger church in the seaport town of Dartmouth.

Now, I call that a selfless decision because while the church was technically larger, he took a significant cut to his salary. It would seem his primary interest was not money.

Instead, he saw an opportunity to reach many more souls. And that's where his heart was. He wanted nothing more than to lead as many people as possible to Christ.

And accounts of his ministry tell us that's precisely what he did. He was relatively young at the time, but his preaching has been described as thoroughly biblical, very earnest, and very practical.

[5 : 52] He had a way of simplifying profound theology. He had a way of using very simple illustrations when teaching, and it really resonated with people, and that's something we see throughout his book.

Now, it was in these early days of his ministry that he got married, for the first time, that is. We don't even know his wife's first name.

But we do know his marriage to her did not last very long because she died after only a few years together. Well, around the time of his first wife's death, the act of uniformity was issued in England. Practically speaking, this meant it was now illegal to be a Puritan. It was illegal to protest the Church of England, and Flabel, his father, and 2,000 other Puritan ministers refused to abide by this new law.

So in 1662, they were ejected from the church. It's what we now call the Great Ejection. These Puritan ministers were no longer allowed to preach or to serve as ministers in the church.

[7 : 06] This meant that Flabel himself lost his pastorate, lost his income, and lost his home. Undeterred, however, he began meeting secretly with his former congregation.

Sometimes it was in homes, sometimes it was in barns, or out in the woods, or on the beach, wherever they could find a place. And soldiers would actually search these areas looking for unlawful meetings.

And Flabel frequently had to hide or run to avoid getting arrested. There's even a story of him disguising himself as a woman to get past some guards.

Another time, he rode his horse right into the sea and swam to get away. I mean, Flabel's story contains some pretty harrowing tales. It was also during this time that he remarried.

But then, when she was giving birth to their first child, she and the child died. It was also during this time that John's parents were arrested.

[8 : 18] His father continued to preach, and his church continued to meet in secret until they were discovered and thrown into prison. Then in 1665, the great plague swept through the city and killed both of his parents.

They both died in prison. And it was also during this time that Flabel began writing, *Keeping the Heart*. Well, in 1665, the Five Mile Act was passed.

This meant that Puritan ministers couldn't even live near their former churches. They had to live at least five miles away, so Flabel moved to the village of Slapton.

Now, I've heard it asked, how is it that we have so many books and writings of the Puritans? Well, I don't have a definitive answer, but it might be because they spent so much time away from their pulpits.

When you won't let a zealous, faithful, earnest preacher preach, what do you think he'll do with his spare time? Well, in the case of many of the Puritans, they wrote, and they wrote, and they wrote, and they wrote.

[9 : 39] After the Five Mile Act, Flabel finished his book, *Keeping the Heart*, and it was published in 1668 under the title, *A Saint Indeed*.

I mean, think back to what Flabel writes in this book. For example, consider this line, God, by such humbling providences, may be accomplishing that for which you have long prayed and waited.

Obviously, when we know the backstory, we realize that Flabel is not writing theoretically about these things. He knows exactly what he means by God's humbling providences because he's lived them.

He's been hunted. He's been persecuted. He's narrowly escaped with his life on multiple occasions. He lost his parents. He lost two wives and a child. And yet he can write, by God, or God, by such humbling providences, may be accomplishing that for which you have long prayed and waited.

That is profound trust in the purposes of God. Now, briefly, I'll tell you the rest of his story. In 1672, King Charles II temporarily allowed the Puritans to meet again.

[11:04] So Flabel returned to his congregation in Dartmouth, but it didn't last. Within a year, the Puritans were persecuted again. Ministers were hunted and arrested. At one point, the townspeople even burned a likeness of Flabel in effigy because he continued to preach in secret.

And they knew it. Flabel also married again. And within a few years, he was a widower again.

Finally, in 1687, King James II granted freedom of worship.

So for the first time in 25 years, Flabel could preach openly without fear. He returned to his congregation. They built a nice meeting house and he served them joyfully.

And I mean joyfully for the next four years. And he also got married a fourth time. There's a story of him riding alone one night when he becomes so overcome with joy that he stops, gets off the horse, falls to the ground, and begins weeping right there on the side of the road, thanking the Lord for bringing him back to his church.

He died in 1691 while on a preaching trip. Supposedly, he suffered a stroke at the age of 63 and they say his last words were, I know that it will be well with me.

[12:33] Well, obviously, Flabel suffered a great deal. But he was right. He wanted nothing more than to reach as many people as possible with the gospel. And the Lord answered that prayer through humbling providences.

I can't even begin to tell you how many people he has reached throughout many generations through his writings alone. There's one story of a man who in Flabel's day bought a copy of Keeping the Heart at that time called A Saint Indeed.

And his sole purpose for buying the book was to ridicule it. He wanted to go through it with a fine-tooth comb and show all of its errors. But when he read it, he was so convicted of the sin within his heart that he went back to the bookshop, bought 100 more copies, and gave them away to as many people as he possibly could.

Clearly, the Lord has used Flabel mightily. And arguably, it was only through those humbling providences that he could be used with such effectiveness.

Well, with that, let's move on to the final parts of his book. Next, we come to six additional guidelines for keeping the heart.

[13:56] And I'll try not to miss any this time. Number one, live in the word. Live in the word. This is where Flabel gives us perhaps this most memorable line.

He says, keep the word, and the word will keep you. One of the things implied in keeping our hearts as Proverbs 4:23 directs us to do is setting boundaries so we know when our hearts are strained.

Think of training a dog to stay on your property or within your yard. You have to teach him how far he's allowed to go and when he's gone too far. So, how do we train our hearts in a similar way?

How do we teach our hearts the boundary lines? Well, we need the word of God for this. Psalm 119, verse 105 says, your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

It shows us where to step and where not to step. It guides the way. As our church confession states, the whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life is either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture.

[15:24] As we say, the Bible is our ultimate authority. We don't rely on traditions or novel teachings or personal feelings.

We trust and obey God's revealed will for us communicated through the Bible. But Flabel takes this lesson a bit deeper because as we've seen throughout the book, the last thing he wants to do is promote a superficial, hypocritical form of religion.

In other words, knowing the Bible and even obeying the Bible are insufficient if the Bible doesn't penetrate and keep our hearts.

He says, just as first receiving the Word regenerates your heart, so keeping the Word within you will preserve your heart.

James 1 says, of his own will, the Lord brought us forth or gave us birth by the Word of truth. The Apostle Peter writes, you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable through the living and abiding Word of God.

[16:43] So the Word was instrumental in changing the believer's heart in the first place, and it stands to reason that it would be instrumental in preserving the heart over time.

Notice what the Apostle Paul says in Colossians 3.16. Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly. In other words, the teachings of Scripture should not be infrequent guests within us. They should not come and go from our mind or only touch us casually. Paul says the Word of Christ should live within us, that is, within our hearts, and it should dwell within us richly, that is, abundantly.

Let the Word of Christ have its run of the place, you know? It should feel very much at home within our hearts. Flavel says, let it dwell richly or plentifully in all that it contains, its commands, promises, and warnings in all that is in you, your understanding, memory, conscience, and affections. Then, it will preserve your heart. Psalm 119 again says, I have stored up your Word in my heart that I might not sin against you.

[18:06] That's a pretty blunt proof text for what Flavel is saying. If you want to keep your heart from sinning, you need the Word of God stored in your heart.

Now, obviously, this means more than just hearing the Word or reading it occasionally. It means we should read it frequently and consistently and with the distinct purpose of storing it within our hearts, which means when we read it, we read it with careful attention and devotion.

We're not just plowing through it quickly so we can check that box off our Bible reading plan.

Beyond that, it's very helpful to memorize the Bible.

I mean, what better way to store it in our hearts than have it memorized? And lastly, we want to be careful to read it and not simply leave it behind.

I'll talk about this more in a moment, but we want to meditate on it. We want to spend the remainder of our day, let's say we read it in the morning, we want to spend the remainder of the day thinking about it.

[19:19] Flavel writes, He says, the slipperiness of our hearts with respect to the Word is the cause of so many slips in our lives. Conscience cannot be urged or awed with forgotten truths, but keep them in the heart and they will keep both heart and life upright.

He then quotes Psalm 37, 31 which says, the law of his God is in his heart, his steps do not slip.

Then he says, or if he does slip, the Word will recover the straying heart again.

He quotes here Matthew 26, 75, and Peter remembered the saying of Jesus and he went out and wept bitterly. We never lose our hearts until they have first lost the efficacious and powerful impression of the Word.

Well, number two, question your heart. Question your heart. The prophet Jeremiah says, the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick.

Who can understand it? I mentioned this last time, but Flavel would have us examine our hearts every night. When it comes to the end of the day, he would have us speak directly to our hearts.

[20:48] You might say he would have us interrogate our hearts. Oh, my heart, where have you been today? Where have your thoughts wandered today? What account can you give of them?

Oh, disobedient heart, vain heart, could you not abide by the fountain of delights? Is there better entertainment with a creature than with God?

Of course, this is a great challenge, isn't it? We have hearts that are deceitful and desperately sick, and yet we're called to guard and keep them.

We have to keep them in check. As the hymn writer says, let that grace, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee, prone to wonder.

Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love. Here's my heart. Oh, take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above. So, Flavel advises that we do not let a day pass without really examining our hearts.

[21:57] perhaps, maybe you superficially, outwardly, did all the right things that day. There were no blatant sins that anybody could see, but we want to look a bit deeper than that.

Remember the warnings from the last lesson. We want to know where our hearts have been, not just our bodies. Where have our hearts been? Flavel says, the more often our hearts meet with rebukes and checks for wondering, the less they will wonder.

If every vain thought were retracted with a sigh, and if every excursion of the heart from God were met with a severe check, we would not dare so boldly and frequently to digress and step aside.

The actions that are committed with reluctance are not committed with frequency. Number three, make room for God.

Make room for God. Perhaps our biggest problem is busyness and distraction. We so often move through the day with a thousand things on our minds and a thousand things to do that we do not

give proper time and attention to the Lord and to heavenly things.

[23 : 18] Paul says, if then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth. For if you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God, when Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.

That's Colossians 3, 1-4. Or consider what he writes in 1 Corinthians 7. The appointed time has grown very short.

From now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it.

For the present form of this world is passing away. Of course, that's not to suggest that we completely detach ourselves from the world around us or neglect our responsibilities here.

[24 : 27] It simply means that we should have our minds and our hearts focused on more important, heavenly, eternal things.

Because this life and everything in it is temporary and fleeting. However, if we're honest with ourselves, we're naturally prone to focus on this life, on earthly things.

Flavel says, take heed, Christian, lest your shop, your earthly business, steals away your heart from your closet, your prayer closet, that is.

God never intended earthly employments for a stop, but rather for a step to heavenly ones. He then says, if your ship is overladen, you must cast some cargo overboard.

More business than you can well manage is like more meat than you can well digest. It will quickly make you sick. So, if we're at all serious about keeping our hearts from sin, we necessarily need to recognize or reorganize and reprioritize our days.

[25 : 50] Recognizing how easily we drift. The Lord in His kingdom and His word must come first and foremost. If we don't have enough time and attention for everything, then something other than Christ needs to be sacrificed.

number four, watch for warning signs. Watch for warning signs.

When Proverbs 4.23 says, keep your heart with all vigilance, it's alluding to a guard standing on the city walls, keeping watch over the city.

His job is to watch very carefully for any approaching enemies and then alert the people in the city below. And in the case of the heart, we have all kinds of subtle things that can easily encroach and really harm us spiritually, so we have to watch for those things.

Flavel writes, if you mean to keep your heart, you must carefully observe its first backslidings from God and stop it there. A man who wants his house to be in good repair must stop up every crack as soon as it is discovered.

[27 : 03] And he who would keep his heart must not let a vain thought be long neglected. Apostasy, the serpent of the heart, is best killed as an egg of a small backsliding.

Oh, if many poor, decayed Christians had looked to their hearts in time, they would have never ended up in the sad condition they currently find themselves in. We may say of heart neglect as the apostle does of vain babblings that it will lead people into more and more ungodliness.

Little sins neglected will quickly become great uncontrollable ones. The greatest crocodile once lay in an egg and the greatest oak was once only an acorn.

The lighting of a small amount of gunpowder may blow up all by leading to a greater quantity.

People think very little about what a proud, vain, lustful, or worldly thought may grow to be.

Behold how great a matter is kindled by a small fire. There's several great examples of Flavel using simple illustrations to convey a point.

[28 : 14] He really paints a picture for us. Paul says, do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump.

Don't let the slightest sin or sign of backsliding go unchecked. Stop it before it continues to influence your heart. Number five, stay close to God.

Stay close to God. Now, I suppose you could combine this point with number three, make room for God, God, but the primary lesson here is that we're not just turning away from earthly business or various distractions.

We're turning towards something. We're devoting our time and attention to something else, namely, God. As Flavel says, the heart is a hungry and restless thing.

It will have something to feed upon. If it enjoys nothing from God, it will hunt for something among the creation. And there, it often loses itself as well as its purpose.

[29 : 31] So we need to actively and intentionally pursue God. Yes, make room for God by clearing away other lesser things, but also seek to fill that void with the Lord himself.

number six, meditate. Meditate. I told you we'd come back to this one.

Here's what Flavel says. Habituate your heart to spiritual meditations if you would have it freed from those burdensome diversions.

By this means, you will gain an ability and dexterity in heart work. It is a pity those smaller portions of our time between solemn duties should lie in our hands and be rendered useless to us.

Oh, learn to save and be good caretakers of your thoughts. So, Flavel seems to have in mind what we think about, what we dwell on between what he has previously called our spiritual duties.

[30 : 43] So, he assumes his readers will meet together with the church for worship. He assumes they'll read their Bibles regularly, but his concern is for what we spend our time thinking about between maybe the Sunday gatherings or those brief times of Bible reading.

What do we spend most of our time thinking about? you know, it's really easy to walk away from our spiritual duties and immediately put our minds on other things.

We leave the church on Sunday and we immediately start thinking about the week ahead. We read our Bibles, you know, check that off our list and we go on our way.

We have children to wrangle, we have jobs to work, we turn on the news and our minds are instantly consumed by the latest political scandal or natural disaster somewhere else in the world. Instead, it would be far better to take advantage of every little moment in the day to meditate on the Lord, on the gospel, on the sermon we heard, on the passage we read.

[31 : 56] I love Paul's conclusion to his letter to the Philippians. In chapter four of that letter, he writes, finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things and the God of peace will be with you. set your minds on good, profitable things, not on every little distraction the world throws at us.

Flavel quotes from Robert Boyle, who was a contemporary of Flavel. Boyle was a chemist as well as a Christian and he uses the helpful illustration of sand, grains of sand in an hourglass.

So think of each grain of that sand as being a moment of time. Of course, there is a fixed amount, there is only so much, there are only so many grains in that hourglass just as there are only so many minutes in our lives.

But grains of sand are very small, so we might be tempted to think, who cares if I waste a few grains? Big deal, they are small, they are insignificant. But Boyle says, although grains of sand and ashes are apart and uselessly small so as to be liable and to be scattered and blown away, yet the skillful craftsman, by a vehement fire, brings many of these together to afford him that noble substance of glass.

[33 : 45] What did Paul say? Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time because the days are evil.

Every moment is an opportunity to do something precious with your time. Every moment. So don't waste them on trivial things when you could at the very least meditate on spiritual, heavenly things. love. So those are Flavel's six guidelines for keeping the heart, and with the remainder of our time, we'll consider three comforts for struggling saints.

Assuming we are genuine believers, putting in the appropriate heart work, as Flavel calls it, where do we find comfort when it seems we struggle to keep our hearts from wondering?

Well, consider these three things. Number one, your heart matters more than your abilities. Your heart matters more than your abilities.

[34 : 56] The mistake we often make when we're judging ourselves is focusing too much on our accomplishments. Maybe we think our gifts are small and relatively useless.

Maybe we don't think we've accomplished all that much in our service to Christ. Perhaps we've spent too much time comparing ourselves with others. Look at what they've done compared to what

I've done.

Well, listen to what Flabel says on this point. I really love this quote. It will add more to my comfort to spend one solitary hour in the morning before the Lord over heart corruption, that is, the corruption of his own heart, than many hours in a seemingly zealous but really dead performance of common duties with the greatest acclaim and richest embellishments of abilities and gifts.

In other words, he would rather be the tax collector in the temple praying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner, than the Pharisee who could boast about all of his righteous deeds. He'd rather deal honestly with his heart and seek God with help or for help with his struggles than ignore his heart issues and continue doing what appears to be good but only on the outside.

So, if you struggle with your heart, then struggle. Struggle. Turn to the Lord for help of course, but accept that struggle and keep fighting to keep your heart.

[36 : 39] number two, God is working for your good. God is working for your good.

If God is allowing you to go through heart struggles, then you should trust that God intends that for your good. Flabel writes, and I'll quote him at length here, pensive soul, let this comfort you.

God is working for your good even by these occasions of your sad complaints. for through these he helps you to see what your heart is and was by nature and therein to acknowledge how much you owe to his free grace.

He leaves you under these exercises of the spirit that you may lie as with your face upon the ground, admiring that the Lord of glory should have ever taken such a toad, so vile a creature into his bosom.

Your base heart, if it is good for nothing else, yet serves to commend and bring out the unsearchable riches of free grace.

[37 : 45] This serves to keep you from continually resting or even glancing upon your own righteousness or excellence. The corruption of your heart working in all your duties makes you sensible to feel that the bed is too short and the covering too narrow.

Were it not for these meditations, you have, after spiritual duties, on the dullness and distractions of your heart in them, how apt would you be to fall in love with and admire your own performances and increases?

For if even with these duties you have much work to do with the pride of your heart, how much more if such humbling and self-abasing considerations were lacking?

And lastly, this tends to make you more compassionate and tender toward others. perhaps you would have little pity for the distresses and soul troubles of others if you had less experience of your own.

All true. If you belong to Christ, every last struggle you face is a means by which God is working for your ultimate good.

[38 : 57] Number three, complete rest is near. Complete rest is near. It won't be like this forever.

I've already quoted Paul who said the time is short for the present form of this world is passing away. You have to admit every burden feels a little bit lighter when you know it's only temporary.

But when we're talking about God's redeemed people, we're not merely saying that this life of struggles comes to an end. No, God gives us a far surpassing life, free of all struggles.

We move from constantly warring with our flesh and our wandering hearts to a world where there is no more warring. There's no more wandering.

There's no more sin. There are no more distractions. There's no more struggle. There's just complete rest and contentment and joy.

[40 : 09] Fear not, Moses said. Stand firm and see the salvation of the Lord. Don't give up. Don't lose heart. Don't be fearful. It won't be like this forever.

You remember Paul cries out, who will deliver me from this body of death? And his answer was, the Lord Jesus Christ. Salvation is coming.

So along with John we say, come Lord Jesus. Come quickly. Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the life and testimony of John Flabel, which really points us back to your faithfulness in every season.

Help us to take these lessons to heart, that we might live in your word, that we might examine our hearts honestly and daily, that we might keep our eyes fixed on Christ.

Keep our hearts, Lord, steadfast in you, for we know that we are always safe in the hands of our Savior. And it's in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

[41 : 20] We're dismissed. Amen.