













*Thomas Robinson*  
SCRIPTURE CHARACTERS;

OR,

A PRACTICAL IMPROVEMENT

OF THE

PRINCIPAL HISTORIES IN THE

Old and New Testament.

IN FOUR VOLUMES.

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THE NINTH EDITION;

CONTAINING A BIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT OF THE AUTHOR.

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VOL. III.

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GOD, WHO AT SUNDRY TIMES AND IN DIVERS MANNERS SPAKE  
IN TIMES PAST UNTO THE FATHERS BY THE PROPHETS,  
HATH IN THESE LAST DAYS SPOKEN UNTO US BY  
HIS SON.—THEREFORE WE OUGHT TO GIVE  
THE MORE EARNEST HEED.—  
HEB. i. 1, 2. ii. 1.

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SCRIPTURE CHARACTERS

THE

GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF THE

OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT

IN A

NEW

AND

REVISED

EDITION

BY

THE

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SCRIPTURE CHARACTERS:

VOLUME THE THIRD.

CONTAINING

*THE FIRST PART OF THE PRINCIPAL HISTORIES*

IN THE

NEW TESTAMENT.



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# SCRIPTURE CHARACTERS.

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## JOHN THE BAPTIST.

### CHAPTER I.

*The New Testament, like the Old, instructs us by examples—preparation made for Messiah's appearance—John appointed His harbinger—commended by our Lord—his birth, education, and early piety—office—austerity—doctrine of repentance—baptism—reproofs and admonitions—testimony concerning Christ—baptized Jesus—referred all to Him—effects of his preaching—reviled—sent for by Herod, imprisoned—directed his disciples to inquire of Jesus—beheaded—buried.*

THE Old and New Testament are closely connected as parts of the same plan, which mutually confirm and illustrate each other. Both are derived from the same divine original; and therefore there can be no opposition between them. But, without detracting from the authority or excellence of the more ancient Scriptures, we may assert that the New Testament claims our peculiar regard, as containing the clearest and most interesting revelation ever delivered to mankind, and exhibiting the completion of the great design, which had been in some measure made known from the beginning. Salvation was published to Adam immediately after the fall, and in every succeeding age intimations were given

VOL. III. B that



that redemption should be accomplished. Yet much obscurity rested on all these various dispensations, till it pleased God to disperse the darkness by the full manifestation of his grace through Jesus Christ, and to "bring life and immortality to light through the Gospel\*."

In the New Testament, also, we perceive the same mode of instruction adopted as in the Old. Our faith, indeed, is fixed by an express and authoritative declaration of the truth: but it is not taught in the same systematical way as in the generality of human writings. A considerable portion of this little volume is historical; and, accordingly, it explains and inculcates the principles of our religion by facts and examples. These we shall endeavour fairly to represent; pointing out at the same time the practical improvement of each circumstance as it occurs. Though we shall necessarily be led to insist on evangelical doctrines, for they will offer themselves to our notice, and surely they are too important to be overlooked, yet we shall not lose sight of our original intention, of deducing profitable lessons for the regulation of our conduct from the principal lives and characters which are recorded.

We are now passing from the comparative obscurity of all the preceding ages, to behold the splendour of a perfect day breaking forth in the Gospel. Justly we may exult, while we hear a heavenly voice addressing us, "Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee †." But the Christian dispensation, so bright and excellent, was ushered in by one of an inferior lustre, which prepared the way. The revelations of God have gradually increased in their clearness from the beginning. As, in the natural world, we are not surprised by the sudden burst of day, for we have notices of its approach; so the Sun of righteousness did not arise till an illustrious harbinger, like the morning star, had announced his appearing.

\* 2 Tim. i. 10.

† Isa. lx. 1.



But who shall be appointed "to go before the face of the Lord?" We might conclude it must be one of distinguished excellence; and accordingly we find the highest character given of JOHN THE BAPTIST, for whom this honour was reserved. Our Lord styles him "a burning and a shining light \*," and declares, "among them that are born of women, there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist †." Many very eminent persons are exhibited in the Old Testament; but, upon the opening of the new dispensation, the grace of God was more abundantly displayed. John the Baptist had the pre-eminence above all the ancient patriarchs and prophets, in the dignity of his office, and his spiritual discernment. Many of them had desired to see and hear those things, of which he was witness; but they were not permitted. They spake and wrote much concerning the Saviour, and had large discoveries of his worth and excellence; but John was favoured with more express revelations, understood and described more clearly the nature and benefits of his redemption, and himself beheld his glory. They pointed to him as to a distant object, the "Messiah that was to come;" John not only proclaimed his immediate approach, but referred the people to him, as already present before them, saying, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world ‡!"

Yet the commendation of the Baptist by our Lord is given with some limitation. Though John was advanced above all who preceded him, many, who came after him, are placed in a higher point of elevation. "He that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." For, as the great mystery of godliness was soon afterwards more fully opened, one of the least abilities and meanest office in the church of Christ (which is often signified by "the kingdom of heaven") might understand more of the plan of salvation than even this eminent saint. Not merely the Apostles, but other inferior ministers, and even

\* John v. 35.

† Matt. xi. 11.

‡ John. i. 29.

private Christians in the present day, are to be considered as favoured with clearer discoveries than John of the riches of divine grace, and of the peculiar nature and glory of the Gospel dispensation. Let us, then, adore the mercy of God in affording us opportunities and privileges, which some of his most illustrious servants, in former times, did not enjoy. Let us value and improve our advantages, and pray that we may obtain such distinct views of redemption, through the blood of Christ, as are suited to the excellency of that economy under which we are placed.

The fourth year before the common account called Anno Domini. Many remarkable circumstances attended the coming of the Baptist, which fixed the eyes of the public upon him, and excited a general expectation of some great events, to be accomplished by him. He was introduced by a train of miracles. His parents were too far advanced in years to look for any children, in the common course of nature\*. But an Angel from heaven announced his birth, and acquainted the father, Zacharias, with the character and office which his intended son should sustain. His very name was determined; and it was foretold by the divine messenger that he should be a person of peculiar holiness and abstinence, "filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb;" and, as the promised forerunner of the Messiah, be the favoured instrument of "turning many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God." Declarations so wonderful Zacharias was backward to credit; and therefore, for a punishment of his unbelief, and a confirmation of the prediction, he was instantly struck speechless. At the appointed time the child was born; and on the eighth day, when the rite of circumcision was performed, Zacharias directed, in obedience to the Angel, that he should be called JOHN, which signifies "The gift or mercy of the Lord." Immediately the tongue of the pious father

\* Luke i. 5, &c.



was loosed, and, under the abundant and powerful influence of the Holy Ghost, "He spake and praised God." The spirit of prophecy had ceased from the days of Malachi, that is, about four hundred years; but it was revived in Zacharias, who broke forth upon this event into an inspired song, expressing the most ardent gratitude to God for remembering his holy covenant, and sending redemption to his people. The venerable priest enlarged upon the nature and excellence of the salvation to be effected; and then, looking on his infant son, he exclaimed, "Thou, child, shalt be called the Prophet of the Highest; for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord, to prepare his ways; to give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the day-spring from on high hath visited us, to give light to them that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

These surprising circumstances could not fail to attract the notice of the neighbourhood. "All they that heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, What manner of child shall this be?" and probably they were the more disposed to receive him when he entered on his public ministry. His education, also, and deportment from his infancy, were so singular, as to excite general regard. "The hand of the Lord was with him," not only, according to the common course of Providence, to support, invigorate, and protect him, but to endue him with an extraordinary measure of wisdom, holiness, and zeal, and other special gifts for his ministerial service. "The child grew, and waxed strong in spirit."

Shall not we, also, perceive and admire the merciful interposition of our God, in behalf of his church? He hath been ever mindful of his promise; and at the proper season he hath not delayed to raise up suitable instruments for the execution of his purposes. "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings he



he hath perfected praise \*." And this consideration furnishes encouragement both to parents and children. We should be concerned, and emboldened to pray for them, that they also, like John, may be sanctified from the womb. And if we see that they possess, not only a vigorous constitution, but wisdom and fervour in the service of God, and that early habits of goodness are formed in them, let us ascribe it to the divine grace, and devoutly acknowledge "The hand of the Lord is with them."

John was an eminent pattern of religion even from his infancy. Ah! how different are the generality of young persons among ourselves; seeking happiness from carnal gratifications, and the pride of life! But behold the Baptist flying from the noise of riot and dissipation, and cultivating communion with God, by meditation and prayer, in a most retired situation. It is supposed that he was deprived of his pious parents in his tender years, and that, under the influence of the Spirit, he secluded himself from society, to be the better fitted for his future service. "He was in the deserts," in those parts of Judea which were little inhabited, where he was separated from public temptations, and had opportunities of private devotion. There he continued "till the day of his showing unto Israel," when he entered on his prophetic office, as it were by inauguration, at the age of thirty years. It is granted there was a peculiar austerity and mortification in John's conduct, suited to the purposes of his ministry, which is not enjoined upon all. But, if you plead an exemption from such severities, are you therefore at liberty to indulge every vain and foolish desire of your hearts, to spend your time and strength in sensual indulgence, and, by abusing the world, to provoke the God who made it? Possibly you may speak well of John's eminent sanctity, because he is removed from the earth, and his example cannot now disturb you: but do you not hate those in the present day who in

\* Matt. xxi. 16.

any measure resemble him, and live in holy temperance and self-denial, "renouncing the pomps and vanities of this wicked world \*?"

But for what post or employment was this remarkable child designed? He came to fulfil the ancient prophecies, which foretold the appearance of a glorious person, as a harbinger or forerunner of the Messiah †. This character the Baptist claimed; and particular care is taken by the Evangelists to prove that those Scriptures had their completion in him. He was the ELIJAH whom Malachi described. For, though he assumed not the name of that zealous reformer, he possessed his spirit and power, and resembled him in his external garb and abstemious fare, as well as in the ardour and fidelity with which he exercised his ministry ‡.

When kings and great men of the earth are about to travel, they send their messengers before them, that, all due preparations being made, they may meet with a ready reception. Every obstacle which might prevent their progress must be removed; the rugged mountains levelled; the deep valleys raised up; the winding path must be rendered straight, and all the rough places smooth. To do this in the moral world; to proclaim the approach of the King of kings; to take out of the way whatever might oppose his admission, such as ignorance, pride, prejudice, and the love of present things; and to dispose the people to receive him by a representation of his glory, and of the benefits which he bestows; these were among the great objects of the Baptist's office.

It were easy to show that he came at the very season which had been foretold; for the sceptre was departing from Judah, the seventy weeks of Daniel were expiring, and many were "waiting for the Consolation of Israel," when John appeared to declare that the promised Deliverer of the church was at hand, and that "the Lord, whom they sought,

\* Catechism.

† Isa. xl. 3. Mal. iii. 1. iv. 5, 6.

‡ Matt. xi. 14. xvii. 13. Luke i. 17.

would



would suddenly come to his temple \*." The Scriptures cannot be broken: every part shall have its full accomplishment in the proper time and way. It becomes us to leave to God the completion of his own plan, and to believe and rejoice, that He, who remembers his holy covenant, will perform whatever shall be needful for the salvation of his people.

According to the common Christian era, called Anno Domini, 26.

It is supposed that John did not enter upon his ministry, nor come forward to public view, till he was thirty years old †. We do not therefore censure him as averse to engage in his work; but we grieve to observe some very unlike him, rash and precipitate, full of their own importance, eager to be employed, who run, and are not sent. He waited in modest retirement till he received his commission. But when "the word of God came to him" (and the revelation, doubtless, carried its own evidence with it), he delayed no longer, but went forth, with the utmost earnestness, to reprove and awaken the careless and impenitent. Every thing in his appearance, his manners, and his doctrine, tended to excite a solemnity and a seriousness in the minds of his audience. He was clothed, as the ancient prophets, with a rough garment, which was composed only of camels' hair, and bound about him with a leathern girdle; and he subsisted on such food as the wilderness afforded, "locusts and wild honey." His address also was calculated to strike an awe into the people; for he spake with authority as a messenger from God, "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Here we observe the nature and the grand subject of his preaching. He declared that the Lord God was about to establish in the earth that holy and spiritual kingdom which had been foretold, especially by Daniel ‡; and that no one could be admitted into it who did not abhor and

\* Gen. xlix. 10. Dan. ix. 24. Mal. iii. 1.

† Matt. iii. 1, &c. Luke iii. 1, &c.

‡ Dan. ii. 44. vii. 14, 27.



forsake his sin, and with a contrite heart return unto the Lord. He considered all persons, without exception, as in a state of depravity, guilt, and condemnation. He unreservedly exhibited the doctrine, which alone prepares for a renewal of heart. He was the preacher of that discipline which makes the soul submit to the grace and government of Jesus, and which must be felt and understood in order to its everlasting salvation. Those who professed a deep compunction were required to conform to the significant rite of baptism, which he administered; thereby publicly acknowledging their pollution, their need of a spiritual washing, and determination to abandon every evil way.

A teacher so remarkable could not but excite general notice; and accordingly we find that immense multitudes of people resorted to him, and were brought under the most serious impressions. Yet he sought not popular applause; for his admonitions were so pointed, his reproofs so severe, that they seemed likely to be offensive in the extreme. Men of all ranks and characters, the most opposite in principle, attended on his ministry; but he flattered none. While many of the Pharisees and Sadducees flocked after him (the former of whom were strict in all external observances of religion, the latter licentious and profane), he addressed them in terms of the sharpest reprehension, and described them all as under the same condemnation. Surprised by their appearance, and suspecting their sincerity, he called on them to give decided proofs of their penitence by fruits of righteousness. He warned them that their relation to Abraham, and their place in the visible church, would avail them nothing; that the last trial was then afforded them; and that, if this were neglected, their case was desperate, their everlasting destruction unavoidable.

Many of his polite and learned hearers were offended with his plainness of speech, and unwilling to comply with his injunctions; but, among the  
common

common people and notorious sinners, many were awakened by his doctrine, and probably converted to God\*. These discovered a serious attention to his words, and professed a readiness to be directed by him in their future conduct. Accordingly, he pressed upon them the duties of charity, justice, and forbearance, and cautioned them against those particular sins to which their respective situations exposed them †.

A doubt seemed to be entertained whether he were not the promised Messiah: but this was soon resolved by his unreserved declarations. He testified that the Saviour, who was about to appear, possessed a dignity immensely superior, and that he considered himself unworthy to perform the meanest offices for so exalted a Character. He represented Him as pouring upon his church the abundant influences of the Holy Ghost, which, resembling fire in its operations and effects, enlivens and purifies the soul. But he warned his audience that the same illustrious Personage is not to be imposed upon by any vain pretences to piety; for that he will make an awful separation between the righteous and the wicked, detect the hypocrites, and destroy them for ever.

At length, when Jesus came forth to public view, and presented himself to be baptized, John pointed him out as the very Christ of whom he had spoken ‡. It had been wisely ordered, in the providence of God, that these two, though so nearly related, were till that time strangers to each other: for thus all suspicion of a collusion between them was prevented. But then, it should seem, the Baptist received a secret revelation that the Person approaching him was the Messiah; and therefore, under a sense of his own inferiority and defilement, he cried out, "I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?" His objection, indeed, was overruled; and, when he had administered the divine ordinance, his testimony concerning Jesus was immediately con-

\* Luke vii. 29, 30.

† iii. 10—18.

‡ John i. 15, &c.



firmed by the visible descent of the Holy Ghost, and a voice from heaven declaring his high character.

We must perceive and admire the meekness and humility of John, who was so careful to assume nothing to himself, and to give all glory to Christ. The notice of the Jewish sanhedrim at Jerusalem was excited by the surprising effects of his ministry, and they sent messengers to inquire the nature of his claims, and the intent of his baptism. To them he replied, with the strongest asseverations, that he pretended not to be any other than the harbinger of the Saviour, and referred them to Jesus as the Person whom he came to introduce. Day after day, while Jesus probably attended upon his preaching, John repeated his testimony concerning him, and called upon the surrounding multitudes to regard Him as the great propitiatory Sacrifice, which alone can expiate our guilt: "Behold," said he, "the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!"

On another occasion we perceive in him the same affectionate respect for Jesus, and eager desire to bring others acquainted with his character. When Jesus had entered on his ministry, and immense numbers flocked after him, the disciples of John were disturbed, lest their master's reputation should suffer\*. But the Baptist immediately corrected their jealousy and narrowness of spirit, and, with an astonishing humility and zeal, rejoiced that the Saviour should be exalted, even though his own popularity would be thereby impaired. He proceeded to describe the high dignity of this illustrious Personage, as the Bridegroom of his church, the Lord from heaven, the Well-beloved of the Father, the universal Governor; and solemnly declaring that every sinner, rejecting his offered mercy, must inevitably lie under the wrath of God for ever.

This is an example which claims the attention of all; for surely there is not an individual who should not labour to possess, though in a different sphere

\* John iii. 26, &c.



of action, those graces which characterized the Baptist: such were his contempt of the world, humility, disinterestedness, and supreme regard to the Redeemer. But the ministers of religion seem more especially concerned to place this eminent pattern before them; for their office requires a nearer resemblance and imitation. They also are sent to "prepare the way of the Lord;" that, every obstacle being removed, He may come and reign in the hearts of his sinful creatures, which, like the wilderness, abound with various impediments, forbidding all access. How vast an undertaking! In a moral sense, the rough and crooked paths must be levelled and laid straight. The faithful heralds must "cry aloud and spare not, and show the people their transgressions," and proclaim unto the end of the world, "Behold, your Salvation cometh!" In every different situation to which they may be appointed, as they have but one object, their language must be the same, "Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." They must therefore preach the law, explain its extensive demands and tremendous sanctions, in order to convince men of their depravity, guilt, and danger, and of the necessity of an entire renovation. Thus they will labour, like John, to "turn the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

You admire the zeal, the courage, and the faithfulness of the Baptist; but are you desirous that your ministers should in any measure copy after him? Are you willing to hear the doctrine which he constantly delivered, and to be addressed with the same unreserved plainness? Be that as it may, your wishes in this case are not to be consulted: "whether you will hear, or whether you will forbear," the ambassadors of Christ must declare, "Except ye repent, ye shall all perish\*." Yes; it is indispensably requisite that the most regular and decent persons should be converted, as well as open and gross of-

\* Luke xiii. 3.

fenders. This mortifies your pride, and alarms your fears; and therefore you are ready to quarrel with those who assert such unwelcome truths. You cannot bear to be told of "fleeing from the wrath to come," or of being "burned up with fire unquenchable;" how, then, would you have been reconciled to the preaching of the Baptist?

But it is not enough that the terrors of the law be denounced; those "who watch for your souls" will testify of Christ, will endeavour to display His glory, grace, and sufficiency, and exhort you to receive him, who comes "to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities \*." They will direct you to the Cross, and entreat you, if you be under painful convictions of guilt, to "behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." Your attendance, approbation, and esteem, will be only so far pleasing to them, as they may thereby have the better opportunity of recommending the Saviour to your regard. Instead, therefore, of aiming at popular applause, they will be most solicitous for His exaltation, and will rejoice when He is magnified, whatever may become of them. But, from the same principle, they will also warn you that contempt and rejection of the Son of God will inevitably expose you to the wrath of God, and that throughout eternity.

Do you profess a serious concern for salvation? Your teachers, like John, will require you to evince your sincerity by your holy conduct, and will earnestly exhort you not to deceive yourselves by vain pretences to religion. They will therefore call upon you to discharge with fidelity the particular duties of your respective places, and to beware of those sins which most easily beset you. Are you willing to listen to such instructions, and to yield a cheerful obedience? The most glorious effects may be expected from the ministry which is exercised, like that of the Baptist, with wisdom, courage, impar-

\* Acts iii. 26.



tiality, and faithfulness. Doubtless he laboured to good purpose among the men of that generation, and "many of the children of Israel did he turn to the Lord their God," according to the prophecy \*. It appears, too, that his testimony was recollected after his death, in consequence of which, probably, many were disposed to believe on the Saviour †. But it must not be concealed that his excellence of character did not secure him from contempt and ridicule. Among some, especially of the higher ranks, he was accounted no better than a madman or a demoniac. "He hath a devil" was the scornful reproach cast upon him ‡. The case is somewhat similar among ourselves; "The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness;" the most exemplary conduct in ministers will not silence the gainsayers; and if John were to rise from the dead, and to preach as before, it is not likely that he would meet with any better treatment. Such kind of censures and derision will, indeed, appear of little consequence to those who are chiefly solicitous to promote the honour of Christ and the salvation of souls. Whatever railing accusations are brought against them, exposed as they may be to violent opposition or "cruel mockings," if they are the instruments of turning any to the Lord, and rescuing them from the wrath to come, they will consider themselves as abundantly repaid, and distinguished with peculiar favour.

We cannot help wishing that the valuable labours of the Baptist had been greatly prolonged for the benefit of the world. But it pleased God, whose ways are unsearchable, to appoint otherwise. The exercise of his public ministry was short indeed; he was not only soon interrupted, but even cut off, when, as there is reason to suppose, there had been a space of little more than three years from his first official appearance. We hasten to consider the close of his life, which was attended with some afflictive circumstances, but not inglorious.

\* Luke i. 16.

† John x. 41.

‡ Luke vii. 33.

John, we have seen, was held in high estimation among the common people, and this excited the notice, if not the jealousy and displeasure, of the great. Accordingly he was sent for, perhaps from motives of curiosity, to the court of Herod, the tetrarch of Galilee, before whom he had an opportunity of bearing a faithful testimony \*. This prince was of an infamous character, and was then living in adultery with Herodias, the wife of his own brother Philip: yet he appeared to be much affected by the solemn admonitions of John, listened to him with pleasure, and, in compliance with his expostulations, reformed many parts of his conduct †. A worldly prudence would have suggested that the preacher must be silent on the particular sins, and especially on the incestuous commerce, of the king. But the honest zeal of the Baptist could not refrain: and, therefore, without fearing the consequences, he boldly reprov'd him, as for his other offences, so for his criminal connexion with that base woman, declaring to him, without reserve, "It is not lawful for thee to have her." So plain an address could not be relished: Herod immediately conceived the warmest resentment, and commanded him to be seized; bound, and cast into prison. The adulteress in her rage meditated further revenge; for she would have killed him. To this proposal, however, Herod would not at first consent, as he still retained a high reverence for John, from a conviction of his peculiar sanctity. Afterwards, indeed, that regard lost its influence, and he would have put him to death, but was awhile restrained, lest, by the murder of this holy man, who was generally beloved and venerated by the people, he should cause an insurrection among his subjects.

Shall we mourn for the imprisonment of the Prophet? We must lament the interruption of his ministry; but there is no doubt that he was happier

\* Matt. xiv. 3, &c. Mark vi. 17, &c.

† See the character of this Herod illustrated in the next volume.



in his chains than his persecutors in the palace. Let us not be afraid of the consequences to which a faithful discharge of our duty may expose us. Let us revere our consciences, and dread the displeasure of God more than the frowns of the world. Let us openly avow our attachment to Christ, and our abhorrence of sin; nor dare to give up the truth in compliment to any man. For it were better to go down into a dungeon for righteousness' sake, than to enjoy the favour of princes, with the reproaches of our own minds, and a fear of the divine judgments.

It should seem that John's disciples had free access to him during his confinement, and that he was solicitous to introduce them to a further acquaintance with the Saviour, to remove their suspicions, or to confirm them in their attachment to Him. On this principle we apprehend, when he heard of the growing reputation and miraculous works of Jesus, he sent to him two of his beloved followers (not for his own satisfaction, but theirs), to inquire whether or no he was the true Messiah\*. Our Lord, probably knowing the purpose, gave a full answer to the question, by referring them to the wonders which he performed before them, in proof of his character, and then warned them to beware of entertaining prejudices against Him. May we learn from John, when we are quitting the world, to bear our testimony for Christ, to rejoice in the advancement of His kingdom, to direct our friends to Him, and labour to establish them in the knowledge and love of his name!

The last scene of this valuable life was most affecting. At a sumptuous feast in Herod's palace, the murder of John was contrived and accomplished. The king, being pleased with the graceful movements of Herodias's daughter, who entertained the company by her dancing, rashly promised with an oath that he would grant her whatever she would ask;

\* Matt. xi. 2—6. Luke vii. 18—23. See Bishop Atterbury's elegant Sermon upon this subject, Vol. iii. Sermon. 2.

and she, by her mother's instigation, petitioned for the head of the Baptist. This appeared to that shameless woman the most desirable gift in Herod's dominions; for she was fired with rage against the preacher, who had openly declared his abhorrence of her iniquitous conduct; and therefore, to satiate her malice, an executioner was immediately despatched to the prison, where the good man perished by the hand of violence.

How mysterious are the ways of Providence, which permitted such a life to be cut short in the midst, and by means so ignominious! We are ready to expostulate with God concerning the wisdom and the justice of his proceedings: for, while the wicked triumph, and the righteous are oppressed, it may seem as if He had forsaken the earth, or took no care of his servants. What shall we say to cases like this before us? Why doth He not plead the cause of the upright, and confound the purposes of his enemies? But we have no right to reply against Him. "He doeth all things well:" nor, in the end, shall any of his faithful people complain, though they may suffer bonds and imprisonment, or martyrdom itself, for their attachment to Him. We mourn for the cruel and premature death of the Prophet; but to him the stroke could not be unwelcome, which instantly transmitted him from a gloomy dungeon to everlasting glory.

His disciples were not ashamed to own their relation to their murdered master. They performed their last office to him, in burying his corpse; and probably from that time they became followers of Jesus. May his memory be dear to us, as it was to them! Whatever reproaches may attend the saints of God, living or dying, may we honour their names, and not be afraid to avow our esteem for them!

You, who hate and persecute the zealous servants of Christ, would have taken part with Herod and his associates. But, ah! consider with whom you would wish to be joined hereafter! Will you not



desire to have your portion with them whom you now despise for their holy singularity? O, seek, then, to possess their faith and love, their self-denial and devotion. "Give diligence to make your calling and election sure:" and you shall soon be, where the Baptist is, adoring your God and Saviour: and you shall there attain a higher degree of knowledge, sanctity, bliss, and glory, than what any of the most excellent characters are capable of enjoying upon earth.

We pray, therefore, with our Church,  
"Almighty God, by whose providence thy servant John Baptist was wonderfully born, and sent to prepare the way of thy Son our Saviour, by preaching of repentance; make us so to follow his doctrine and holy life, that we may truly repent according to his preaching, and, after his example, constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen \*."

\* Collect for Saint John Baptist's Day.

# JESUS CHRIST.

## CHAP. II.—SECT. 1.

*Importance of the character of Jesus—to be studied with prayer—and for the increase of holy affections—its originality—proofs of his existence—writers of his history competent and faithful. Consider, as an introduction, I. His Pre-existence, II. His Deity, III. His Incarnation, IV. Preparations made for him.*

WE cannot but feel a suspicion and diffidence of ourselves while we attempt to delineate the character of the Saviour. So great is its importance in every view, such a divine splendour and glory are cast around it, and so profound are the mysteries with which it is connected, that our minds are filled with an awful reverence when we draw near to contemplate: and we seem disposed rather to stand at a distance, in silent and devout admiration; for “we cannot order our speech, by reason of darkness.”

But the difficulty of the task should not discourage our humble, though weak, endeavours. Only let us undertake it with earnest supplication, that we may not “darken counsel by words without knowledge.” In the study of every part of the sacred Scriptures, we have continual need of prayer, that we may possess a just and spiritual discernment. But here, especially, while the Lord himself comes down from heaven, and passes by before us, we should beg that the veil may be removed from our minds, and that He, “who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, may shine into our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ\*.” The history of Cæsar or Alexander may

\* 2 Cor. iv. 6.



be perused with indifference, or, if you please, with the severity of criticism; but the history of the Son of God is no matter of idle amusement, or curious speculation: for every thing here is wonderful, and designed to excite in us the devout affections of gratitude, love, and zeal.

A right apprehension of his character will constrain us to cry out with Simeon, in rapturous adoration, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, —for mine eyes have seen thy salvation \*." Every proper view of Him will also produce a sanctifying influence; for, "with open face, beholding, as in a glass, the glory of the Lord, we are changed into the same image, from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord †."

The most superficial observer must allow that the history of Jesus is replete with wonders. Almost every circumstance in it is uncommon and unparalleled. He was born, He lived, suffered, and died, in a very different way from any other man. This originality of his character is a strong presumption in favour of his religion; because no impostor ever did resemble him, nor is it probable that such a resemblance would ever be pretended.

It is not our design to produce the many evidences which might be offered in support and confirmation of our holy faith. But it may be noted briefly that the proof of the whole depends on this single fact, that there did really exist such a person as Jesus of Nazareth. And this is established upon stronger testimony than any other similar fact can be. The declarations of many ancient Pagan writers put it beyond a doubt; and it is manifest that the first and bitterest opposers of the Gospel never once denied it. It is also more clearly ascertained by the propagation and continuance of Christianity in the world. From whence did this system take its rise, or how could it have been supported, if there had never been such a Teacher as Jesus Christ?

\* Luke ii. 29, 30.

† 2 Cor. iii. 18.

But it is asked, Are the records, which describe his life and character, genuine accounts, and what may safely be relied on? The answer is obvious: the books of the New Testament have a more convincing evidence of their authenticity than any other writings of the like ancient date. The history of our Lord is transmitted to us by those who possessed the most certain information upon the subject. The Evangelists, Matthew and John, were disciples and constant attendants of Jesus: Mark and Luke, also, had the best opportunities of being acquainted with his actions and discourses from the Apostles themselves; the former, it is believed, being the companion of St. Peter, as the latter was of St. Paul. These published their narrations very soon after the transactions which they relate, and in the midst of enemies; so that their accounts, if false, might, and no doubt would, have been denied and confuted. But they have stood the test of ages; every attempt to overturn them tends to confirm their authority the more. Indeed their integrity appears by many indubitable marks. The manner of their writing is peculiar to themselves; for their artless simplicity is such as proves that they did not contrive a system of their own. They delivered plain facts without disguise, and generally without any reflections, which might bias their readers; so that, from the circumstances fairly represented, we are left to draw the necessary conclusions for ourselves.

What, then, is their report concerning the great Founder of our religion? This is an extensive subject, which it will be our benefit, as it is our duty, to contemplate; for it will tend to excite the most devout affections in our hearts. We shall endeavour to draw the general outlines of this astonishing Character; and, as an introduction to the subject, we shall point out some particulars, the knowledge and belief of which seem of great importance, in order that we may form right conceptions of the life of Christ. We consider, therefore,

I. His



I. His Pre-existence.—We do not inquire after any condition in which we might be supposed to be placed previous to our birth; for this, clearly, is our first state. But his appearance in human flesh is described by such expressions as cannot be applied to any mere man, and prove that he was possessed of a glorious being prior to his nativity. “He was sent into the world” as his Father’s messenger; “He came down from heaven,” and took our nature, of his own accord; all which are mentioned as instances of his amazing condescension; but such they could not be, if his existence had commenced only at his incarnation. He speaks of himself as having “glory with the Father, before the world was;” and St. Paul asserts that “he made himself of no reputation,” or “emptied himself of his glory,” that he might be obedient unto death\*. And does not this language imply an antecedent state and dignity? Our life was not the effect of our choice; but he is represented as voluntarily entering upon that, which he had in common with us, to fulfil his own gracious purposes: and this very consideration lays us under unspeakable obligations of gratitude, love, and obedience to him. “Lo! I come,” said he †, which expression denotes that he possessed some other mode of being, before he was born of his virgin mother.

It was the Redeemer who appeared and revealed himself to the church in the Old Testament, by the name of JEHOVAH, and who is called “the Angel, in whom was the name of God,” “the Angel of his presence ‡” He governed the world by his providence, before he took up his abode in it, ordering all things by his wisdom and power. Nay, he was the Creator both of heaven and earth, with all their various inhabitants, visible and invisible; “He spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast §.” And do not these things import that he had an existence prior

\* John xvii. 5. Phil. ii. 7.

† Exod. xxiii. 20, 21. Isa. lxiii. 9. Acts vii. 38.

‡ Col. i. 16, 17. Psal. xxxiii. 9.

† Heb. x. 7.

to that of every creature? It might seem strange to search for arguments in support of this truth, if we were not surrounded by persons who will allow the Saviour nothing more than the properties of humanity. An error this, which strikes at the foundation of our faith. For, if we accede to such a sentiment, we must either say that sin is not so offensive to God as to require any great expiation (and therein we should deny his righteous character, and the sanctions of his holy law), or else we must abandon our hopes of heaven, since no adequate atonement can have been made by a mere man like ourselves; and therefore "we are yet in our sins."

We have advanced but a little way in our subject, in asserting the pre-existence of Jesus. If we inquire, what was his former state? what his attributes and glory? we shall find ourselves obliged to maintain,

II. His Deity.—Not only did he partake of the perfections of the Godhead, in consequence of his union with the Father, but he was in himself very and eternal God. If this be not granted, a considerable part of the clearest declarations of Scripture, on which the doctrine is founded, must be either expressly contradicted, or, by an unhappy refinement of criticism, explained into nothing. It were easy to produce a multitude of texts, which prove the point in the most full and direct manner. But this would lead us too far from our purpose. It must, however, be noted, that if Christ be no more than a creature, though of a superior order, or one exalted to be God merely for his office, the Bible appears too abstruse and difficult to be designed for common people, and of all other books most dangerous and destructive, as being the cause of much idolatry, in the worship of the Son of God.

Suffice it in this place to refer to that sublime description of our Lord's person and dignity which stands at the beginning of St. John's Gospel, and is a proper introduction to the life and character of  
Jesus.



Jesus. It seems to have been the grand design of the Evangelist to vindicate the divine glory of our Redeemer, in opposition to those very errors which then began to show themselves, and have been only broached afresh by modern heretics. In what terms could he have delivered the doctrine more expressly than he has done when he asserts, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God \*?" It is obvious that he speaks, not of a mere attribute, but of a real person; for he adds that "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us †." He meant, therefore, to describe his beloved Master; and he has evidently applied to him the very same title of "the Word," and "the Word of God," in some other places ‡. Nor is it an unsuitable appellation; for (not to insist on the import of the term *Logos*, as the wisdom, or the intellectual image of God), as our words discover the sentiments of our minds, so he has revealed the divine will, and declared the Father to us.

"He was in the beginning," not only at the first production of this world, but before the existence of any creature. "He was with God," in the same state of unlimited happiness and glory, and One with *JEHOVAH* by an ineffable and mysterious union of nature. Nor was he raised to this exalted rank by an act of peculiar favour; but he always possessed it as of his own right, since "he was God," partaking of the perfections of Deity in all their fulness. In confirmation of this, the Apostle ascribes the origin of the universe to him: for "all things were made by him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." And will it not be allowed, that "he, who built all things, is God §?" Some, indeed, have maintained, that in the formation of the world he acted by a delegated power, and not by his own essential divinity. But how is this consistent with St. Paul's account, that "all things

\* John i. 1, &c.

† 14.

‡ 1 John i. 1. Rev. xix. 13.

§ Heb. iii. 4.

were created FOR HIM," as well as "by him," and that by him all things consist\*?" In what can he be inferior to Jehovah, who is not only the Author, but the final Cause, of all? Further, the Evangelist declares, that he had existence in himself as its original source, from which the whole human race derive all their understanding, happiness, and comfort. "In him was life; and the life was the light of men."

The splendour of his majesty was in a great measure concealed during his residence upon earth; but there were those who saw through the veil of his humanity; and they have borne a decided testimony. "We beheld his glory, the glory as of the Only-begotten of the Father †." This could not be any external lustre; for his condition was attended with circumstances of peculiar meanness, and, probably, he carried marks of affliction in his countenance. Yet he appeared, both from his words and works, to be One of superior dignity; for he spake and acted in numerous instances as Lord of the whole creation. There were some special seasons, when the brightness of the Deity broke forth upon his favoured attendants. These saw some part of the radiance of his majesty, when he was transfigured on the mount: they heard the voice, by which "he received from God the Father honour and glory ‡:" and they his chosen witnesses have declared that which they saw and heard; "showing unto us that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto them §." The celestial spirits, also, who could not mistake his real character, were commanded to express their reverence of him. For, when the Lord God "bringeth in the first-begotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him ||."

Let us, then, maintain the truth, which is clearly delivered and fully confirmed to us; nor fear, on the

\* Col. i. 16, 17. † John i. 14. ‡ Matt. xvii. 1, &c. § Pet. i. 16, 17.

¶ 1 John i. 1—3.

|| Heb. i. 6.



testimony of the Apostles, to receive Jesus as "the Lord of glory \*." If even angels bow before him with profound adoration, who are we, that we should refuse to pay our homage to him? Let us inquire, Do we entertain worthy notions of him, or feel a suitable regard towards him? Do we render him the honour due unto his name? It is possible to assent to his divinity, in a mere speculative way, while the heart remains insensible to his excellence, and disaffected to his service. Accordingly, many call him "Lord, Lord," who see no beauty in him, that they should desire him, and who do not the things which he says †.

But, to form a right judgment of the character of Jesus, we must take a different view, and observe how he gives us access unto himself. The glory of his essential and unveiled Deity would dazzle our sight. But we are encouraged to draw near, while we are assured that he is IMMANUEL, "God with us," or, God in our nature; "God manifest in the flesh." Hence we consider,

III. His Incarnation.—Various and opposite errors have prevailed respecting the Person of Christ; some denying him divinity, others humanity. We believe that they were both truly united in him, and that he was very God, as well as very man. Here, indeed, many objections are raised. Such an assumption of the manhood, it is said, is unintelligible, unnecessary, and impossible. Alas! to what impiety may we be led by our own pride and presumption! There are those who will not allow any thing to Jehovah

\* Many are the publications, in which the apostolical testimony for the divinity of Christ is admirably collected and stated. To those who may not have leisure for the perusal of the works of Dr. Waterland, we might recommend "A Short Defence of the Divinity of Christ," published at Leeds, price 3d., "Jones's Catholic Doctrine of the Trinity," &c. If the learned reader wish to see the testimony of the primitive church, in addition to that of the Apostles, the writings of Bishop Bull, particularly his "Defensio fidei Nicænae," and "Bishop Horsley's Tracts in controversy with Dr. Priestley," are deserving of his regard.

† Luke vi. 46.

which

which exceeds their own scanty comprehension, and, without regarding his express declarations, arrogantly determine that it is not proper or possible for him to exist and act in any other way than what they themselves understand, and even prescribe, for him; and then they dignify their conceits with the name of "Rational Religion."

If it be asked how this union between two natures so distant could be effected, we pretend not to explain the manner; for it is not explained to us. And, indeed, there is no subject, even relating to ourselves, in which, if we enter into curious speculations, and would unravel every difficulty, we might not be soon embarrassed, confounded, and obliged to confess our ignorance. And shall we, who know nothing clearly about the mode of our own being, undertake to say of what the great and glorious God may be capable? The fact is clearly established: it is declared, "the Word," who was in the beginning, with God, and was God,—"was made flesh." He partook of all our infirmities (sin only excepted), being subject to the same sensations, fatigues, pains, and temptations, as any the weakest of our species. He was, therefore, as truly man, as if he had possessed no higher nature. This will be sufficiently manifest while we describe the various circumstances of his life.

We allow, then, that there is a sense in which the Son is inferior to the Father; for, as his servant, he is sent by him, receives his commission from him, and to him likewise owes his exaltation. But expressions of that kind, which are frequent in the Scriptures, by no means contradict the doctrine here maintained; for they are used only with a reference to his manhood, or his mediatorial office, in which it is granted that he was in a state of subjection. The incarnation being admitted, the Bible speaks a consistent language respecting the Redeemer; whereas, otherwise, it would be at variance with itself.

This



This humiliation of Jesus is represented as a necessary, or at least a suitable and expedient, scheme. "In all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren \*." In his humanity alone, he was capable of obeying and suffering for us: in this alone he could sustain the character of "a merciful High-priest," and be "touched with a feeling of our infirmities." Thus the same nature which sinned atoned for the transgression, and repaired the breach. Hereby we draw near to God, and God to us: He stoops to us, and we rise to Him: our IMMANUEL joins heaven and earth together. Of how great importance, and how replete with consolation, is the doctrine before us!

It is "the man Christ Jesus," who is proposed as our pattern; for, in the peculiar exertions of his divinity, he is not exhibited as an example to us. In him, then, humanity is gloriously exalted; and, by an union with and a resemblance of him, we shall attain the highest dignity of which our species is capable. O, let us pray that we may so contemplate his excellence, as to become more and more conformed to his likeness!

We might conclude that the object was great indeed for which a Person of such eminence condescended to take up his abode on the earth. We shall draw the same conclusion from considering,

IV. The preparations made for his appearance.—Upon a slight view of the subject, we must suppose that he was about to carry into execution some scheme of immense magnitude and importance. An expectation of his coming had been raised in the minds of men for four thousand years. His introduction into the world, therefore, was not a sudden event, nor a design formed in haste. Every circumstance had been foreseen and declared, nay, appointed, from eternity; the everlasting counsels of Jehovah had determined it; the course of divine Providence had been directed to it; and, probably, the

\* Heb. ii. 17.

earth itself created for it. The grand purpose of his incarnation was revealed immediately after the fall; and the church had been taught to trust and rejoice in his atonement, even before his appearance, as it has done since that period, and will do to the end of time.

It is asked, "Why was his coming delayed so long, if indispensably necessary? or why not longer, if not wanted before?" These are ignorant and presumptuous questions. For who are we, that we should require the God of heaven to justify to us the wisdom and propriety of his dispensations? We should adore and embrace the mercy which is offered to us through the Saviour, rather than dispute about it. His manifestation in the flesh, no doubt, was seasonable: yea, the Scripture asserts that he died "in due time," and that he came "in the fulness of time\*." Some reasons may be assigned why the great event did not take place sooner:

1. That the necessity of redemption might be more clearly perceived; and that our condition without such an interposition might be proved to be absolutely desperate. The Lord suffered men to walk in the way of their own hearts, in order to evince their extreme and total depravity, the blindness of their understandings, the perverseness of their wills, and their utter inability to restore themselves. For, if we possess any wisdom, strength, or goodness, sufficient to effect our own recovery, how strange that no approach was made towards it for four thousand years! A full trial, surely, was allowed; but during all that time the ignorance, degeneracy, and wickedness of the world, seemed to increase. It appears, then, from undoubted fact, that, left to ourselves, we should never have obtained reconciliation with God, and that without Christ we are "ready to perish." O, let us profit by this sad experience, and learn to value our Saviour the more!

2. That a long series of clear and circumstantial

\* Rom. v. 6. Gal. iv. 4.



prophecies might be delivered, and fulfilled in him. This was a wise and gracious appointment; for the Gospel has thereby received an abundant strength of evidence. It pleased God, in almost every age from the beginning, to raise up and inspire faithful men to proclaim the coming of a Redeemer, and to describe his character and office. Accordingly, they foretold, with an astonishing exactness, his birth, life, and death, and the various incidents relating to them; and from their united testimony, compared with that of the Evangelists, we are furnished with incontestable arguments in support of the truth. They "spake, as they were moved by the Holy Ghost," and have left us no reasonable cause to doubt that JESUS is the CHRIST.

3. That preparations might be made by the divine Providence for his reception, and for the ready propagation of the Gospel. The Lord God, in all his preceding dispensations, had a regard to the intended incarnation of the Saviour. All other circumstances were appointed in subserviency to that event, which exceeds, in magnitude and importance, every occurrence in the history of mankind. It is obvious to all, who examine the sacred records, that this was the case throughout the whole economy of the Jews; and from the same authority we learn that the state of the Heathen world, and all their great empires, were so ordered as to make way for "the Prince of peace\*." One dominion gave place to another, by the wise and sovereign disposal of God, till, at the birth of our Lord, the Romans had extended their power to every known part of the earth, and thus opened a communication for spreading the Gospel amongst the most distant nations. At that period, also, an universal tranquillity prevailed, which was most uncommon and almost unprecedented, emblematical of that kingdom then about to be established, and intended to be the means of introducing it. Thus every thing was accommodated to the

\* Dan. ii. & vii.

purpose, when Jesus, "the Desire of all nations \*," appeared.

We shall soon have occasion to remark that the blessed inhabitants above were not unconcerned in this event. Angels descended to announce his coming; and a multitude of them, with their heavenly songs, declared and celebrated his nativity. John the Baptist also, we have seen, his illustrious harbinger, was sent with an express commission to prepare his way, and to proclaim his dignity and grace.

We need not add more. From the concurrence of these various circumstances, we perceive some vast design to be in agitation, to which the attention both of heaven and earth is directed.

The subject before us will furnish us with an interesting application to different characters.

1. You, who love the Saviour, or who feel your need of him, draw near, that you may admire his excellency and perfection. How great is his glory! How astonishing his condescension! How rich, and free, and extensive, is his mercy! How firm the covenant which he hath sealed with his blood, and confirmed by his oath! Let us join our testimony, and say, that he is "full of grace and truth." Is there not enough in him to dispel your fears, to encourage and enliven your hopes? And will not the belief of what he has done for you constrain you to devote yourselves to him? You know him not, unless you feel an irresistible force in this argument. Do you esteem the world, then, poor and worthless, in comparison of Christ? O, turn away your eyes from beholding vanity! Come, and contemplate his perfect beauty, till you can say, He is to me "the chiefest among ten thousand, and altogether lovely †."

2. You, who glory in yourselves, and not in the Saviour,—who depend not upon his merit, but your own,—consider what you are doing. What a contempt do you show for this divine Person, and his

\* Hagg. ii. 7.

† Sol. Song v. 10, 16.



gracious undertaking! You act as if all this wondrous plan had been entirely needless; for, if your moral qualities and works of righteousness be sufficient to recommend you to the favour of Heaven, then, doubtless, the incarnation as well as the death of Christ was vain \*. Then the counsels of God have been employed about a fruitless design; and his Providence has been contriving and executing an absurd, because an useless, scheme. But this you would not assert. And, if you allow the necessity of such an interposition, how wretched, how desperate, must be your case, which required it! Let the conviction have its proper influence! Under a sense of your guilt, bow before the Redeemer, and implore the benefits of his salvation: "Lord, save us: we perish †!"

3. You, who are despisers of Christ, or who disregard, at least, the important doctrine of his manifestation in the flesh, consider the grounds of your objections, or your inattention to it. We entreat your serious examination of these things; and ask why you should turn away your ears from them. You are curious to hear what is uncommon and wonderful; eager to read any eventful history of men and empires; and always at leisure to listen to the trifling news of the day. And is there nothing in this subject which deserves your notice? Or how can you acquit yourselves of the most consummate folly, if you are indifferent about it?

But your neglect of the Saviour arises not so much from weakness of understanding as from a rooted depravity of heart. You know that he is an enemy to your pride, sensuality, covetousness, and resentment; and therefore you wish not for any acquaintance with him. "You love darkness rather than light, because your deeds are evil; neither will you come to the light, lest your deeds should be reproved ‡." Here, then, we see the real cause of your infidelity: but is this what you will justify?

\* Gal. ii. 21. † Mat. viii. 25.

‡ John iii. 19, 20.

We warn you that these are not matters of a trifling nature, but of infinite moment. The Lord God hath spoken to you by his Son,—“the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his Person \*;” and he will be heard, or you shall answer it at your peril. He yet continues to address you in terms of love and mercy; but, if you reject or slight his offers, wo be unto you that the Son of God is come. This aggravates your guilt, and renders your destruction certain, and unspeakably tremendous. “He that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God †.”

May we know the day of our visitation; and, exulting in the glory and the grace of Jesus, may we each of us cry out, with a holy transport, “Behold, God is my salvation: I will trust and not be afraid: for the LORD JEHOVAH is my strength and my song; He also is become my salvation ‡!” Amen.

\* Heb. i. 1—3.

† John iii. 18.

‡ Isa. xii. 2.



## JESUS CHRIST.

## SECT. 2.

*The humiliation and glory of Jesus contrasted. I. His miraculous conception—announced to the Virgin Mary and to Joseph. II. His nativity—at Bethlehem—in a stable—declared by an angel to shepherds—celebrated by a multitude of the heavenly host—inquired after and published by the shepherds. III. His childhood and education—circumcision—presentation in the temple—testimony of Simeon and Anna concerning him—visited by eastern Magi—preserved in Egypt—conducted to Nazareth—distinguished for his superior wisdom—discoursed with the doctors in the temple—dwelt in subjection to his parents at Nazareth.*

It was an astonishing event, that the glorious Personage, who is called "the Word of God," "was made flesh, and dwelt among us." But our wonder is increased when we consider the circumstances of his appearance and abode on the earth. They were such as we should have thought unsuitable to his dignity, inasmuch as there was no display of external splendour, which could excite the notice of the world. "He had no form nor comeliness," such as men admire; and "there was no beauty" in him, which would induce a carnal heart "to desire him." Had the whole contrivance of this amazing plan been left to us, we should, probably, have ordered matters very differently, and have had, not a poor, despised suffering Redeemer, but, what the Jews wished for, a temporal Messiah, who should possess supreme dominion.

dominion, dazzle the eyes of every observer by his pomp and magnificence, and constrain all the nations of the earth to bow with unfeigned subjection to him. It was otherwise appointed by the unerring wisdom of God; and, so far from being offended at the mean appearance of Jesus, we should contemplate with profound adoration its gracious purposes.

Yet it is said, "we beheld his glory\*." There resided a glory in him, which his people discovered, and which sometimes broke forth to the confusion of his enemies; a glory far superior to all the grandeur of conquerors and kings. Indeed there was a wonderful contrast in the various circumstances which attended the Saviour's abode on earth; for the most exalted dignity and the deepest abasement were united in him. Such a Messiah the ancient prophecies describe, and therefore such an one the Jews ought to have expected. They might have learned that "the Holy One of Israel," and the afflicted suffering Messiah, was the same Redeemer. May all our prejudices against him be removed; and, while we hear of his coming in the flesh, may we be disposed to receive him into our hearts, and with loud hosannas welcome his approach, crying, "Blessed be he that cometh in the name of the Lord: Hosanna in the highest!" We consider, for the present,

I. His miraculous Conception.—This, as well as some other incidents preceding his nativity, demands our regard. We have already seen that the providence of God had made great preparations for him, and that the various predictions of the inspired writers had raised among the Jews a general expectation of a glorious Deliverer. Those who studied the sacred oracles, and carefully observed the state of their nation, could not but perceive that the exact period marked out both by Jacob and Daniel for the appearance of SHILOH, MESSIAH, THE PRINCE, must be near at hand†. They were,

\* John i. 14.

† Gen. xlix. 10. Dan. ix. 25.

therefore,



therefore, "looking for redemption in Israel," and at last they obtained the object of their hope. At the appointed season, "in the fulness of time," the Saviour was announced.

But who was the favoured instrument of bringing him into the world? It had been declared that he was to be "the Son of David according to the flesh," and therefore that he should be born of some descendant of that king of Israel. But he was likewise to be the Son of God; for he must be "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners\*:" and, that the corruption of our fallen nature might not be communicated to him, he must be conceived, and his body produced, in a very different way from any other man. It was accordingly provided in the divine counsels, and foretold by the Prophet Isaiah, that "a VIRGIN should conceive and bear a son, and should call his name IMMANUEL †."

Let infidels cavil as they please, and strain their ingenuity to invent objections to this scheme, and represent the whole as absurd and impossible; we will still admire the power and wisdom of God in it, and maintain, that He, who originally "formed man of the dust of the ground," could, by this or any other expedient which he should choose, prepare a spotless body for the residence of his own Son.

A pious female of the house and lineage of David, espoused, but not then joined in marriage, to Joseph, a descendant of the same family, Mary the blessed Virgin, was appointed to be the mother of the Saviour: an honour which many holy women in Israel had aspired to for ages before ‡. Both she and her expected husband were placed in a mean situation; but they possessed a peculiar excellency of character, and obtained the notice of Heaven. The Lord passed by the mighty, the noble, and the learned of the earth, and poured contempt upon all worldly pageantry, when he submitted to appear in

\* Heb. vii. 26.

† Isa. vii. 14.

‡ Luke i. 18, 26—56.

the lowest rank, and to be born of so poor and obscure a person. Yet, even upon that occasion, his dignity and glory were displayed. One of the highest order of the celestial spirits, Gabriel, was commissioned to inform the pious virgin of the counsels of God concerning her, and to declare the name and the office of that illustrious Offspring which she was to produce by a miraculous conception through the energy of the Holy Ghost. "Behold," said he, "thou shalt conceive in thy womb and bring forth a Son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David; and He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there shall be no end."

Intelligence of this supernatural effect, which immediately took place, was not long afterwards given by a heavenly messenger to Joseph, the betrothed husband of Mary\*. He had perceived her pregnancy, and, not knowing the cause, could not but suspect her integrity, and therefore wished to break off his engagements with her. To relieve him from his anxiety, the angel explained her real situation, encouraged him to receive her as his wife, and directed him to call the Child, whom she should bear, by the significant name of JESUS, denoting his office as the SAVIOUR, and the deliverance from sin which he accomplishes for his people. Thus Joseph became his reputed father; for, agreeably to the divine mandate, "he took unto him Mary his wife." But the conception was immaculate; as "he knew her not till she had brought forth her first-born Son."

Here, then, we contemplate the Son of God, "made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law †." This is "the Seed of the woman," who was appointed to "bruise the serpent's head ‡." This is "the Seed of Abraham," in whom it is promised that "all the nations of the

\* Matt. i. 18—25.

† Gal. iv. 4, 5.

‡ Gen. iii. 15.



earth shall be blessed \*." This is that illustrious Progeny of David, of whom it was declared, that "the throne of his kingdom shall be established for ever †." Peculiar care is taken by the Evangelists to prove that in this, as well as every other respect, he fulfilled the ancient predictions. Accordingly, St. Matthew records his genealogy from David and from Abraham, by the side of Joseph his reputed father; and St. Luke traces his origin not only from David, but from Adam, in the line of Mary, his real mother ‡.

Are we suitably affected by the mysterious truth which we maintain, that Jesus, who was the Lord of David, became his Son §? The conception of the Saviour was the most astonishing event which had ever been known upon the earth before. The first formation of the world may justly excite our wonder; but that is really nothing in comparison of the incarnation, when the Creator stooped to be a creature. What power, what condescension, what grace, are displayed in it! It should not be forgotten, that it was "for us men, and for our salvation, He, by whom all things were made, came down from Heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost, of the Virgin Mary, and was made man ||." Let us study the subject, not with the cold indifference of curiosity or speculation, but with humble and devout affections, till we feel the fire of divine love burning within us, and constraining us to sing aloud with Mary, "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in GOD MY SAVIOUR ¶." We proceed to consider,

II. His Nativity.—All things, it should seem, were in a state of readiness and preparation for his introduction into the world, excepting one circum-

\* Gen. xxii. 18.

† 2 Sam. vii. 13.

‡ The accounts of the two Evangelists are thus easily reconciled by allowing that Joseph, whom St. Luke calls "the son of Heli" was his adopted son, or son-in-law, by marrying his daughter Mary.

§ Matt. xxii. 45.

|| Nicene Creed.

¶ Luke i. 46, 47.  
stance.

stance. An ancient prophecy had determined that the Messiah should be born in Beth-lehem; and Mary dwelt at Nazareth, which was at no small distance\*. How, then, shall that Scripture be fulfilled? The providence of God can easily remove the greatest apparent difficulties, and, in a mysterious way, make all creatures subservient to his own purposes. We do not observe that Mary contrived or wished to change her residence with a view to the prediction; for, probably, that was not attended to at the time. But the mind of a Heathen prince, though he acted only from political motives, was influenced to accomplish this event. The Roman Emperor Augustus became the instrument of performing the divine counsels†, for, in consequence of a general enrolment of all the inhabitants of Judea, which he had commanded, they were obliged to repair to the place where the original inheritance of their families lay. Joseph and Mary, then, in obedience to the edict, went to Beth-lehem, the city of David, as being his descendants, where their names were to be registered: and, during their continuance in that town, for so it had been ordered by the appointment of Heaven, the proper season of her delivery came.

But what do we behold? The Redeemer of the world destitute of an accommodation upon his first entrance into it! We might have supposed that the palaces of kings would have thrown wide their gates to admit the illustrious Visitant. But he sought not the notice of courts; and he obtained not a favourable reception even at an inn. For such was the low condition of his holy mother, that she was obliged to abide in a stable during the very pangs of childbirth, and to lay the First-born of the whole creation in a manger.

Let not then the followers of the Lamb be anxious about their present circumstances, considering the mean and ignoble state in which their Lord appeared. It is probable that the poorest of them meet with

\* Mic. v. 2. Matt. ii. 5. John vii. 42. † Luke ii. 1, &c.  
bette,



better accommodations than he did. Yet do we not discover in some an eagerness, which is unsuitable to their character, to procure the pomps and vanities of the world; and in others a peevish discontent, because they cannot obtain them? Surely you are not conformed to Jesus Christ, if his birth has not taught you to look with indifference on the splendour of the great, and to be satisfied with the lowest situation. Do "ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich \*?" You must learn from this example to restrain your desires, and to "be content with such things as ye have †."

Kings and princes of the world knew nothing of that illustrious Personage, who then condescended to be an inhabitant of the earth: but the blessed spirits above contemplated the event with astonishment, and came down, as his attendants, to celebrate his nativity with their rapturous songs. They discovered a generous and disinterested joy on our account, while they exulted in the appearance of the Redeemer, and recommended him to our regard. We can form no conceptions of their feelings on that occasion, when they perceived him, the object of their worship, in the form of a helpless infant, and as an outcast from men, whom he was about to save. One of this celestial order was commissioned to proclaim his birth, as "good tidings of great joy, which should be to all people," and to declare his high character, as "the Saviour, who is Christ the Lord." But to whom was the information given? Not to the great emperor of the world, nor to any of his nobles, but to a company of poor shepherds, who "abode in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night." An intimation this, that a proper attention to temporal concerns will not unfit us for the reception of divine knowledge; and that, in a faithful discharge of the duties of our station, we

\* 2 Cor. viii. 9.

† Heb. xiii. 5.

have most reason to expect the gracious communications of God to our souls.

Nor was there one angel only employed on the occasion; for immediately "a multitude of the heavenly host" brake forth into a chorus of praise, exulting in the restoration of our fallen race, and admiring the perfections of Jehovah as exhibited therein; "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will towards men." They needed not the grace which "came by Jesus Christ," but they have taught us to join in songs of grateful adoration, for the salvation which is brought unto us. Have we adopted their anthem? Do we magnify and exalt the name of our God, while we see the various attributes of his nature displayed and harmonized in the wondrous plan of redemption? We surely have abundant cause to cry aloud, "Glory to God in the highest;" because "peace," with all its attendant blessings, may now be established "on earth," inasmuch as he, whom we have provoked, has declared "good will towards men." Those only will refuse to sing, who despise and reject the offer of reconciliation with Heaven.

What effect, then, should these "good tidings of great joy" produce in your minds? How did the shepherds receive them? They delayed not to inquire after the new-born Saviour; they went with haste to Beth-lehem, where they found the report concerning him to be true. The information, also, which had astonished them, they communicated to others, and gave praise to the God of Israel, who had manifested to them such peculiar mercy. And shall not you, who hear so frequently of the coming of Jesus Christ, desire to know him? Will you refuse to give an immediate attention to the message of the Gospel? What is there of equal importance? Will you not examine, at least, the intelligence which is brought you? The facts are so well authenticated, that they will bear the most exact scrutiny.



If, like the shepherds, you are convinced of the truth of the report, you will also direct the notice of others to this wonderful event. You will take up your words and say, "We have seen, and do testify, that the Father hath sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world \*." You will bear witness of his worth and excellence to all around you, and call upon them to admire and praise him, who in your view "is altogether lovely." And, whether they regard your testimony or no, you will adore the divine goodness in having "laid help for you upon One that is mighty," and bless the God of all grace, who, in remembrance of his covenant, had brought redemption to his people. If you wish to conceal your religion, we may presume that you consider it as an insignificant and useless thing, and therefore that you are strangers to the real character of Christ. A spiritual manifestation of his glory would excite in you the most ardent affections of gratitude, love, and zeal, dispose you to recommend him to others, and constrain you to "magnify the God of Israel."

In pursuing the history of Jesus, we consider,

III. His Childhood and Education.—We are lost in astonishment, while we contemplate Him, who is "the Lord from Heaven," in all the weakness of infancy, requiring a mother's watchful care, and carried in a nurse's arms. He passed through the various stages of human life, and experienced every infirmity to which we are subject, sin only excepted.

As he was "made of a woman," that he might be obedient to the law †, he submitted to all the Mosaic rites, and accordingly was circumcised on the eighth day. At the appointed time, also, he was presented to the Lord, by his parents, in the temple at Jerusalem, and even redeemed, as the divine precept required ‡. He came "to fulfil all righteousness;" and has taught us, by his example, not to

\* 1 John iv. 14.

† Gal. iv. 4.

‡ Exod. xiii. 2. Numb. viii. 16, 17. xviii. 15, 16.

despise or neglect the ordinances of God, though, as external observances, they may seem unprofitable and vain.

We have remarked, that the blessed angels joined in concert to celebrate his nativity: and now we shall perceive, that there were not wanting chosen witnesses among the inhabitants of the earth, whose voice should more publicly and more widely proclaim the consecrated Infant. When, therefore, he was presented to God, according to those ancient prophecies, "The desire of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with glory;" and "The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple \*;" Simeon, an aged saint, who "waited for the Consolation of Israel," through the immediate influence of the Spirit attended at the solemnity, and made known the event. He embraced the holy Infant in his arms, and cried out, with the most devout and lively sentiments of faith, love, and joy, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation." He foretold also the different effects of his appearance, observing, that it would excite general opposition; and, though to some it would be the means of a happy restoration, would bring upon many final and aggravated ruin. Another person, likewise, a pious female, far advanced in years, confirmed the testimony. "One Anna, a prophetess, coming in that instant, gave thanks unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem."

How much may we learn from this account! Is it not as necessary for us, as for the ancient Jews, to look for redemption? And shall we not feel and express the most ardent gratitude and joy for the revelation of the Messiah? Though we are not favoured with a sight of his bodily presence, yet, if, by faith, we behold his glory, we also shall smile at the prospect of death, and be satisfied to close our eyes upon

\* Hag. ii. 7. Mal. iii. 1.



every earthly object. But, alas! is not Jesus, according to the prediction, "a sign," which is every where "spoken against?" To how many is he "a stone of stumbling, and rock of offence!" Even to this day, by the preaching of his Gospel, "the thoughts of many hearts are revealed," for therein he affords a test or trial of men's characters and dispositions. The humble penitent is comforted by the declarations of his abundant grace; the sensualist discovers his own vile affections, while he determines that he will not follow Christ; and the Pharisee betrays his pride and hypocrisy, in refusing "to submit to the righteousness of God."

A further honour awaited the infant Saviour: his glory was displayed in distant lands. A new and miraculous star was lighted up in the heavens; and we may be allowed to consider it as an intimation that "the Star of Jacob" was then rising upon this dark world. Some pious sages in a remote eastern country observed it, and by revelation, as it is reasonable to believe, understood the signal\*. Immediately they took their journey, with great pains and expense to themselves, to inquire for and to worship this illustrious Personage, who was born to reign over the Jews. They were conducted by the guidance of the star, first to Jerusalem, and then to the very house at Beth-lehem where the young Child was. There they fell down before him in profound adoration, and presented him with various oblations of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. When, by the divine direction, they had returned to their own land, doubtless they published the advent of the Saviour, according to the information they had received, and prepared the way for the reception of the Gospel amongst their countrymen. These venerable sages, then, were as the first-fruits of the Gentiles, and a token of the future enlargement of the church by the accession of distant nations, who should "soon stretch out their hands unto God †."

\* Matt. ii. 1, &c.

† Psal. lxxviii. 31.

Thus it had been predicted, "The forces of the Gentiles shall come unto thee: the multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah: all they from Sheba shall come: they shall bring gold and incense; and they shall show forth the praises of the Lord \*."

Their conduct will reprove our neglect and contempt of Christ. His manifestation in the flesh is declared among us, if not by a star in the heavens, yet by many credible witnesses; but how few inquire after him! How few are willing to forego their ease and interest; how few, who would not grudge the pains and expense of these wise men, to attain the knowledge of salvation! Why are we not, like them, worshipping at the feet of Jesus? Why do we not offer to him, out of our treasures, some mark of adoration and gratitude? Why are not all our talents, and all our faculties of body and soul, devoted to him? For, as he requires, so he is worthy to receive, this service at our hands.

But, though such honours were done to Jesus in his very infancy, a violent persecution arose against him, and his life was preserved only through the divine interposition. The cruel tyrant Herod, alarmed by the account of the Magi, as if the new-born King for whom they inquired were to possess temporal dominion, came to the horrid resolution of destroying him. At first he pretended veneration, and a desire to worship him, with a view to accomplish his murderous designs. But the Lord God, who knew the hypocrisy of his heart, defeated his intention, by preventing the wise men from carrying him any intelligence. Unwilling to relinquish his purpose, and enraged by the disappointment, with great barbarity he commanded all the young children throughout the neighbourhood of Beth-lehem to be put to death. Still Jesus was secure, under an invincible defence; nor was it possible that the end of his appearing should be frustrated. The Lord directed Joseph to

\* Isa. lx. 5, 6.



seek a retreat in Egypt, and there the holy family abode till the death of the tyrant.

Why do we "fear the fury of the oppressor?" For "where is the fury of the oppressor?" How vain and foolish the projects of the wisest politicians, how weak the efforts of the most powerful monarchs, against God! He will defend his church, and provide a sure refuge for his children in times of danger. Egypt itself, which had formerly been the seat of violent persecution, shall, whenever he pleases, afford protection and security to his people.

So early did the sufferings of Jesus commence; and, through his whole life, he was "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." As he advanced in age and stature, he discovered marks of extraordinary abilities; being "strong in spirit, filled with wisdom," and endued with "the grace of God" in an eminent degree. We apprehend that his uncommon fervour, knowledge, and piety, even in his childhood, excited the admiration of the neighbourhood where he dwelt. We have but little information concerning that period, but the few circumstances which are recorded must not be disregarded.

When he was twelve years old (and therefore, according to the Jewish custom, was made subject to the law), he went up to the temple with his pious parents to celebrate the passover; and upon that occasion he showed the most zealous attachment to the house and service of God. His parents and relations were returning home, while, unknown to them, he still remained at Jerusalem. After a painful search, they found him on the third day amongst the public teachers of religion, listening to their instructions, requesting answers to his inquiries, and, by his profound understanding in divine things, excited the astonishment of all who were present. When his mother had expressed her wonder at his conduct, as having occasioned them many anxious fears, he replied, with a zeal far beyond his years, "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" Yet he did not renounce his

his obedience to Joseph and Mary, or despise them on account of his own superior rank or abilities; but, with all filial regard and submission to their authority, he went down to dwell with them at Nazareth. There also he continued to exhibit, with his increasing age and stature, an increasing measure of wisdom and excellency of character; for his human nature received gradual communications from the fullness of the Godhead.

Here, then, we have an example which may be proposed to all; the example of a child, which may reprove and shame the most advanced in life. It more especially, however, demands the attention of young persons; therefore we call upon such to contemplate the amiable and holy conduct of Jesus at that early period. Do not the same dispositions which he possessed become you also? And do you, who are only twelve years old, acknowledge your obligations to worship God, and frequent his ordinances? Is the house and service of God your delight? Jesus undertook a long journey, and, after he had spent many days together in waiting upon God, seemed unwilling to leave the sacred courts. But do not you think the least trouble, for any religious purposes, more than enough; and the shortest time too long? Have you not said "What a weariness is it? When will the sabbath be gone?" Are the grand subjects of divine revelation your study, or the matter of your humble and diligent inquiry? Do you listen with eagerness to the instructions of your teachers; and would you gladly embrace an opportunity of conversing with them for your own edification? Have you considered, that you also, as well as Jesus, should "be about your Father's business?" Or are you consulting His will, and seeking His glory? Ah! how different are the greater part of our young people! What ignorance and contempt of God, what a profane neglect of his house, his word, and ministers, do we discover in them!

If



If the ordinances of religion be despised, we need not wonder that domestic duties are disregarded. If you feel no reverence towards God, it is not probable that you will honour your father and your mother. And is not your deportment in the family very opposite to that of Jesus? He might have commanded more than twelve legions of angels to attend and obey him; yet he submitted to his poor parents, content to live with them in their state of meanness and indigence, and probably to labour also in the common occupation of a carpenter for his support. But have we not occasion to lament in you an obstinacy of spirit, a contempt of authority, a supercilious behaviour, and an aversion to all habits of industry? You increase in age and stature; but do you at the same time advance, as Jesus did, in every thing excellent and lovely? Such an improvement, it must be allowed, would be the source of happiness to yourselves, as well as comfort to your parents, and would render you a blessing to society, and an ornament to the profession of the Gospel. Study, then, the example of Christ, till, by the grace of God, you admire and resemble Him. He, who has exhibited himself as the pattern of all holiness, will strengthen you by his Spirit to follow his steps; and if, in this world, you walk as "he walked," you shall hereafter see him in his glory, and reign with him for ever.

## JESUS CHRIST.

### SECT. 3.

*Jesus dwelt in obscurity till his thirtieth year, when he entered on his ministry—prepared for it, I. by his baptism, II. by his fasting, III. by his temptation, in which he was urged, 1. to distrust, 2. to presumption, 3. to ambition.*

WHILE every trifling anecdote of the celebrated characters of antiquity is eagerly explored, little inquiry is made concerning the greatest Character ever exhibited in the world. We might suppose that curiosity itself would prompt men to study the history of Jesus; though that be not a proper disposition of mind for the contemplation of such a subject, nor would our vain curiosity be satisfied. The holy Scriptures are not adapted to gratify our subtle speculations, or to answer the various questions which we might be inclined to propose.

We might wish to know many of the private circumstances and juvenile transactions of the Saviour, concerning which we have little or no information. Nothing is told us of that very large proportion of his life which elapsed between his twelfth and his thirtieth year; except, in general, that he was subject to his parents; that, as his stature advanced, he increased in grace and wisdom, and gave early signs of uncommon excellence. Yet during all that period he was hid in obscurity, and removed from the notice of the world; for he dwelt at Nazareth, a town so mean and so peculiarly infamous, that the question was asked in a proverbial manner, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth \*?" There he passed for the son of

\* John i. 46.



a carpenter, and probably laboured at the same low trade with Joseph his reputed father; for he himself was called "the carpenter\*."

Joseph and Mary, together with some others, could not but remember the signal testimonies which had been delivered concerning him; and, from a view of his whole spirit and deportment, they must have formed the highest expectations. But still he was not generally known or regarded; no public display of his glory had been made; and even many of his relations were disposed to revile him †.

What amazing condescension is this! He submitted for a long season to a state of poverty, contempt, and labour. He appeared to be of little benefit to the world, till near thirty years of his life were expired, till but three or four remained for the performance of the errand on which he was sent. Shall any of us, then, complain that we are placed in a low condition, and appointed to a hard and servile employment amongst those who despise and deride us; and, therefore, that our sphere of usefulness is very contracted? While we behold Jesus in "the form of a servant," let us be satisfied with our lot; rather let us be ashamed of harbouring a murmuring thought.

The example of our Lord is a lesson to those who are aspiring to a public station in the church, and preparing for the work of the ministry, not to push themselves forward to that holy function, or conclude that their whole life is lost, because they are not called forth to it so soon as they might wish. They may be in danger of being hurried away by an impetuous and intemperate zeal, though actuated, in the main, by the purest motives both towards God and man. The advice to such persons is, Wait till the proper season; attend to, and faithfully discharge, your present duty; and, while you aim at a more enlarged sphere of action, seek for all suitable qualifications, and resign yourselves to the divine disposal.

\* Mark vi. 3.

† John vii. 5.

Jesus began his ministry, as it is probable that John the Baptist did, at the usual age when the Jewish priests entered on their office. That time being arrived, he did not, through indolence or cowardice, decline the task assigned him, but set himself with vigour to execute his work: "Lo," said he, "I come to do thy will, O God \*." May we also learn with readiness to obey our Father's call, that no selfish regards may keep us back from the service appointed us!

Before we contemplate our Lord in his public character, we shall consider his preparations for it in three remarkable circumstances, his baptism, fasting, and temptation; the importance of which is very properly intimated to us in that prayer of our church, "By thy baptism, fasting, and temptation, Good Lord deliver us †"

I. His Baptism.—It may surprise us that the holy Jesus should submit to this ordinance, which he could not use as a sacrament of repentance, or as "the laver of regeneration;" (and it may be urged as an argument, that even those may be admitted to the rite, in whom the whole intention of it cannot be answered). But he thereby designed to dedicate himself most solemnly to the service of God; to put an honour upon the ministration of John; and to leave his disciples an example of that obedience which he meant to require to his own future institution. By the testimonies, also, which he was then to receive from the Baptist himself, and immediately afterwards from God the Father by an audible voice from heaven, he has furnished us with an unquestionable evidence of the truth and importance of his mission.

According to the common sort of John, Jesus himself came from Nazareth to the banks of the river Jordan to be baptized of him ‡. The Baptist would gladly have declined the office, from a sense of his own ex-

\* Heb. x. 7.

† Litany.

‡ Matt. iii. 13—17. Mark i. 9—11. Luke iii. 21—23.



treme unworthiness, and of the exalted character and dignity of Jesus. "I have need," said he, "to be baptized of thee; and comest thou to me?" But our Lord overruled the objection, observing, that being made subject to the law, as the Mediator between God and man, he must be conformed to every divine appointment: "Suffer it to be so now; for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him."

Are we not also under indispensable obligations to submit to every ordinance of God? And are we paying that regard which is due to all the institutions of our holy religion? Ah! what neglect and contempt of the most express and solemn injunctions! What a spirit of profaneness and licentiousness of manners prevail! How different the generality of professing Christians from him whose name they bear! He, though Lord of all, learned obedience as a servant; and if he thought it incumbent upon himself "to fulfil all righteousness," what exemption shall we plead?

You allow, perhaps, the administration of baptism; if not that of John (which is not contended for), yet that of Christ, which is designed to be a standing ordinance in the church to the end of time. But do you consider that you have need to be baptized, not with the mere element of water only, but with the Holy Ghost, with "the washing of regeneration," that "sprinkling of clean water," by which God "will cleanse you from all your filthiness?" We enter not here into the controversy (which has been so warmly maintained, on both sides, as to prove an unprofitable and hurtful disputation) concerning the proper mode and subjects of Christian baptism. But we address you as having been, by this solemnity, devoted to the service of Christ; and we call upon you to remember the obligations which it has laid you under. By this sacrament you are joined to the armies of the faithful, and are bound "to fight manfully under the banner of Christ against sin, the world,

world, and the devil, and to continue Christ's faithful soldier and servant unto your life's end \*." The vows of the Lord, then, are upon you. And have you not perfidiously violated these engagements? You should be reminded that the external rite of baptism, though ever so scripturally administered, will avail you nothing, if you are not "washed from your filthiness," and have not now the "answer of a good conscience towards God †."

We behold a peculiar honour put upon Jesus at the conclusion of the ordinance. The solemnity was closed, but he remained in prayer; and immediately, while he looked up, the heavens were opened over his head, and the Spirit visibly descended upon him, resembling a dove, perhaps in shape, as well as in its hovering motion. This was like an inauguration of the Saviour, when he was about to enter on his public work, and an intimation, that, as "the Anointed of God," he received the most extraordinary influences of the Holy Ghost. Nor was this all; he obtained a still more glorious testimony, for "Lo! a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

This was a memorable transaction indeed, whether we consider it as designed for the encouragement of our Lord himself, then undertaking his arduous office, or for the conviction of others, that they might be disposed to regard him as the true Messiah, to reverence him as "the Only-begotten of the Father," and to rejoice in his mediation, as perfectly according with the divine will. The three Persons of the Godhead were here exhibited, and their entire agreement in the plan of salvation was publicly declared. The Son appeared in human flesh; the Spirit rested like a dove upon him; and the Father, though he assumed not any bodily shape, spake with an audible voice, proclaiming his concurrence with the Redeemer, and approbation of his work of love.

If we, also, be solicitous to obtain for ourselves a

\* Office of Baptism.

† 1 Pet. iii. 21.

testimony



testimony of the favour of Heaven, let us learn from our Lord to expect it in answer to fervent prayer. And we may be the more emboldened to present our supplications in the name of Jesus, since, as we have seen, he is consecrated to and accepted in his mediatorial office. The residue of the Spirit is with him; for "he has received gifts for men." We may rejoice and triumph that the Father is well pleased in him, as our Surety and our Advocate. But are we likewise, as we ought to be, well pleased with him? Are we not backward even to credit his declarations, though confirmed by such a fulness of evidence, and unwilling to acquiesce in his gracious purposes for our salvation? Why do we not feel the most ardent affection towards him, and say, "This is my Beloved, and this is my Friend \*?" Can we consider the work of mercy which he came to perform, the rich benefits which he bestows, the excellency and perfection of his person and character, and then say, "There is no beauty, that we should desire him †?" This contemptuous disregard and rejection of him would betray an extreme baseness of disposition, which must be utterly inexcusable.

We follow Jesus from the banks of Jordan into the wilderness, and there behold him submitting, for a season, to a state of severe mortification, as a further preparation for his future service. Hence we contemplate,

II. His Fasting.—Before he went forth to the exercise of his public ministry, and with a view, probably, to improve in his private devotions the late solemnity of his baptism, he retired from society. "He was in the wilderness ‡," a desert part of Judea, full of high and rugged mountains, the very appearances of which were dismal, and calculated to impress the mind with terror. In this gloomy retreat "he was with the wild beasts," exposed, as it should seem, to their furious assaults; but, like the lions in Daniel's den,

\* Cant. v. 16.

† Isa. liii. 2.

‡ Matt. iv. 1—11. Mark i. 12, 13. Luke iv. 1—13.

they were restrained from violence, and obliged to acknowledge the power and presence of their Lord and Maker. Here he continued, in a total forbearance of food, for the space of forty days and forty nights together, that his whole attention might be given to meditation and prayer.

Moses and Elijah, two eminent types of him, had done the same before. But we contend not for an exact imitation of their conduct. It is not asserted that the same sort of retirement, the same degree or length of abstinence, are necessary, or even possible, for us. As our circumstances and strength would not permit, so neither does our duty require us to be secluded from society for so large a portion of time. But we have frequent and urgent occasion, and might find opportunities of leisure, for religious privacy. This appears particularly needful at our entrance upon any important undertaking, that, by a more express and earnest application to Heaven, we may obtain such supplies of grace as will fit us for our work; and also after the enjoyment of strong consolations in our souls, that we may be preserved from spiritual pride. In general, it is observable, where retirement for the purposes of devotion is neglected, that public ordinances retain but little efficacy, and that divine comforts, if bestowed at all, are soon lost, or attended with a haughtiness of mind. Must we not ascribe it to this cause, that many, who profess a love for the Gospel, seem to receive no benefit from its ministrations, but walk in much darkness and distress; and that others are censorious and overbearing, as being elated with a fond conceit of their high attainments? Alas! we fear that the secret duties of religion are almost totally disregarded in this trifling and dissipated age, when the most part carefully avoid solitude, and know not how to employ themselves alone.

But what have we to do with fasting? It is allowed there have been those, as in the church of Rome, who enforced and practised it, with the utmost degree of superstition.



superstition. But we, of the present day, are in danger, not so much from superstition, as from licentiousness. It is granted, also, that it were presumptuous in us to attempt a total abstinence for forty days. But shall we therefore say that it is in no case incumbent upon us to fast at all? The ancient saints thought it expedient and necessary; since, upon most of their solemn occasions, they joined fasting and prayer together. Undoubtedly, persons of different constitutions cannot be confined within the same precise limits in the forbearance of food. A regard should be had to circumstances, and the great purposes of devotion constantly kept in view. We should humble ourselves before God, and acknowledge that we have forfeited our daily bread. This may tend to "mortify our members, which are upon the earth \*," and to subdue in us the evil affections of pride, anger, covetousness, and lust: and, while every indulgence is denied to the body, the immortal spirit may be much less oppressed, and drawn up the more to high and heavenly things. These ends could not be answered in our Lord; but we must be strangely ignorant of ourselves not to allow that in these respects we have abundant cause for humiliation and self-denial. Yet why do we talk of fasting, since most men plead for, and demand, the full gratification of all their sensual appetites? The very mention of mortification is laughed at as the weakness of enthusiasm and the madness of superstition; while profaneness, intemperance, and riot, almost every where prevail and triumph. Few, therefore, can sincerely join with us in the Collect of our church, and say, "O Lord, who for our sake didst fast forty days and forty nights, give us grace to use such abstinence, that our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey thy godly motions in righteousness and true holiness, to thy honour and glory †!"

Our Lord underwent a far more severe trial in the

\* Col. iii. 5.

† First Sunday in Lent.  
wilderness,

wilderness, as a necessary preparation for his mediatorial office. This will appear in considering,

III. His Temptation.—It may justly fill us with amazement to behold the Son of God assaulted, vexed, and harassed, by the prince of darkness. But this very circumstance exhibits his power and grace. He came to vanquish the devil; and, as there can be no victory without a conflict, he entered the lists with his adversary, and gave him every advantage for the attack, on purpose that he might utterly confound him, and thereby encourage all his own faithful followers to expect the same conquest which their Lord and Master has obtained.

The onset was made upon Jesus soon after his baptism, and the effusion of the Spirit upon him. And, in general, we shall feel the effects of Satan's malice after our attendance on religious ordinances, in which we are favoured with divine consolations. "My son, if thou come to serve the Lord, prepare thy soul for temptation\*." It occurred also just before he entered on his public work. The devil directs his envenomed darts in an especial manner against those who are going forth to subvert and destroy his kingdom. Yet even these persons stand in need of temptation, and will derive from it peculiar benefits. They will improve, by that painful discipline, in humility and tenderness of spirit, and learn to administer proper counsel and encouragement to those who are brought into similar circumstances of distress.

We may also remark the place in which our Lord endured the conflict; it was "the wilderness." No situation, indeed, will secure us from the assaults of our malicious adversary. In vain should we fly to deserts or to cells; we should be still exposed. Even though we be devoutly employed in meditation and prayer, as we have intimated, we are liable to an attack. Nay, retirement itself, in some views, may give an additional force to temptation. Perhaps the

\* Ecclus. ii. 1.



wilderness was therefore chosen for this singular engagement, in which the fiend was allowed to exert his utmost rage; the very horrors of the scene favoured his vile purpose. "Jesus was led up of the Spirit," by the peculiar impulse of the Holy Ghost, with which he was then filled, "to be tempted of the devil." Confident of his own superior strength, he dreaded not the combat: nor have we any real cause to fear, when called out to the same warfare, if we depend on his mighty arm for protection and support. But let us beware of presumption. Remembering our own weakness, and the power of our enemy, let us pray continually, "Lead us not into temptation."

What could be Satan's expectation in making so extraordinary an attack? Perhaps, from the conquest he had obtained over the first Adam, he might derive a hope that the Second Adam also would be baffled and overcome. He determined, at least, to make the desperate trial. His envious and malicious rage would not suffer him to submit, without attempting an opposition, and he resolved to vex, if he could not destroy, his Antagonist. Such likewise is his conduct toward all those who fight against him under the banner of the cross. Their state is safe; and probably he may know it; but for the present they shall all feel the effects of his malevolence.

We shall remark the artfulness and subtlety of this spiritual adversary. It should seem that he has some way of learning our inward tempers and dispositions, as well as external circumstances, since he generally proposes that object or plan of action which appears most desirable and convenient to us. How great, then, is the necessity of circumspection and prayer! Three temptations were offered to our Lord, exactly adapted to his situation; and they afford a specimen of Satan's ordinary devices.

1. Jesus was urged to distrust the divine care. After his long abstinence, he felt the importunate demands of hunger, and yet possessed no natural means  
of

of support. Then came this apostate spirit (concealing his real character,) perhaps in human form, or as an angel of light, and suggested to him that he had within himself the power of immediately supplying his wants. "If thou be the Son of God," said he, "command that these stones be made bread." We see the cunning address of Satan. His aim was, to induce the Saviour to call in question his high dignity and peculiar relation to God, or else by a miraculous agency to relieve himself, as if he were forsaken of his Father. He takes a similar method now. He tempts the disciples of Jesus to doubt whether they be the children of God, intimating that their trials and distresses are an unfavourable mark; and not unfrequently puts them upon using imprudent and forbidden means of procuring deliverance, through a disbelief of the divine faithfulness and love. Let us beware of such an attack, and learn what resistance we should make.

It would have been easy for our Lord to accomplish what Satan proposed; but he would not even seem to distrust the care of Providence; and he has left us an example of a firm reliance upon God in the severest difficulties. He replied therefore from the Scriptures, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God \*." Thus he has taught us to be more anxious to obtain the divine blessing than a supply of food, which of itself can administer no nutriment to the body. We should not dare to pursue any unlawful course, or take one step out of the road of duty, for the providing even of necessary support. Let us preserve our dependence upon the God of heaven, who in a thousand ways can give us bread to eat, or even sustain us without it.

2. Jesus was then tempted to presumption. "The devil taketh him up into the holy city," (in what way we do not inquire, nor is it necessary to know,) "and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple."

\* Deut. viii. 3.

Here



Here again the address was most artful: he urged him to presume upon his relation to God, in the belief of which he could not be shaken, to make an improper display of it, and to expect protection without a sufficient warrant. "If thou be the Son of God," said he, "cast thyself down from hence; for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee to keep thee; and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone \*." Satan, we observe, can appeal to Scripture, to serve his own purposes; and his conduct has taught us to be upon our guard against a wrong application of detached passages of the inspired writings; for texts are frequently quoted in support of the most erroneous sentiments and immoral practices.

In this instance we behold the admirable wisdom of our Lord, wresting the Scripture out of the hands of his adversary, and confounding him with it. He replied, "It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God †." We are forbidden, then, to prescribe unto God what evidence he shall afford us, or to presume upon his care over us in that line of conduct which he has not authorized. Yet to this very sin the followers of Christ are generally urged. Indeed, they are in danger from the two opposite extremes; for, if Satan be baffled in one point, he will try another; and therefore it will be an advantage to be apprized of his devices. What though you be the children of God, and can maintain your hope in him? consider well where you venture to set your foot. He is not bound by any promise to comply with your vain wishes, or to preserve you where your proper duty does not call you. Dare not, then, however you may be solicited, to deviate from the right path for the display of your own consequence and abilities; nor fondly imagine that in such a deviation you can be influenced by any true regard to the glory of God.

3. An attempt was made to seduce the Saviour by

\* Psal. xci. 11.

† Deut. vi. 16.

such an offer as a proud and ambitious mind would greedily have caught at. "The devil taketh him up into an exceeding high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them, in a moment of time." We do not well understand how he conducted this stratagem: but, being permitted to try all his artifices, he had some method of representing the most delightful prospect of earthly pomp and grandeur that could be exhibited or conceived. Pretending, therefore, to have the absolute disposal of every thing in his own hands, he promised to deliver up to Jesus all the power and all the magnificence of empire, on condition of receiving an act of adoration. How daring the scheme! how detestable the falsehood which supported it!

The design of Satan is the same in all his assaults, but he does not always avow or discover it. "Fall down and worship me" is in effect the meaning of every temptation. And, ah! how frequently does he succeed! He still continues to offer "the lust of the eyes and the pride of life," and these are the baits which thousands seize with eagerness, to their eternal ruin. "All this," says he, "will I give thee;" and thus he persuades men to barter away their consciences, and to forsake God and his truth, from the prospect of worldly advantages. But we would remind you, while you listen to such solicitations, that you will probably be disappointed. He to whom you hearken is a deceiver and a liar. It is not in his power to bestow what he promises, and what you desire to obtain. Besides, if your largest wishes could be gratified, your possessions would still be poor and contemptible. "What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul \*?"

At length the holy resentment of Jesus was roused; and, giving the tempter to understand that his real character was known, he rejected the proposal with abhorrence: "Get thee behind me, Satan; for it is

\* Mark viii. 36.



written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only thou shalt serve \*." We learn, then, how to repel the attacks of our enemy. We must possess the utmost firmness of opposition, and despise every offer of temporal advantage, which might induce us to depart from our God. We must determine to yield no reverence or obedience to any but Him; and then we shall be proof against all the enticements of the world.

The conflict was ended, and the victory obtained. Satan departed, yet only "for a season," intending on some other occasion to renew the assault: and immediately a company of holy angels came to minister to the relief of Jesus, and to rejoice with him on his glorious triumph.

How replete with instruction is this history! It affords a striking representation of the power, the malice, and the subtlety of our adversary, and the nature of that warfare to which we are called. You, who follow Christ, must expect to be conformed to him in his temptations. An opposition of the very same nature will be made against you. Do not stagger in your minds when you come into the conflict; nor decline the combat, though most severe, but arm yourselves for it. "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you †," as he did from Jesus. For this purpose, besides the other parts of the Christian's armour, "take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God ‡." Your Saviour has left you a noble example. Study how you may use this weapon to the best advantage; that, like him, you may be able to answer and repel every suggestion with, "It is written."

But here, also, are exhibited the grace and tenderness of our Redeemer. How astonishing the humiliation to which he submitted! Painful to himself, yet most salutary in its consequences to us! Now we are assured that "he is able to succour you who are tempted §," that he is "touched with the feeling

\* Deut. vi. 13. † James iv. 7. ‡ Eph. vi. 17. § Heb. ii. 18.  
of

of your infirmities \*," and that he "will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able, but will with the temptation also make a way to escape †." Yes, in due time you shall triumph over all the malice of your enemies. The victory of Jesus was an earnest of victory to his people. "The God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly ‡." Angels are anxiously observing your conduct. In the view of such witnesses, "stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong §," and soon they will congratulate you on having obtained a glorious and everlasting conquest.

But are not many unacquainted with this spiritual warfare? If you make no resistance, but willingly comply with the solicitations of Satan, you may escape some of the difficulties which the Christian soldier meets with. All may seem to be peace with you: but the reason is, the prince of darkness holds his palace in your hearts; and, while you allow him the possession, he will not disturb you. But you are no other than his vassals, "led captive by him at his will." We entreat you to arise, and assert your liberty: for to what tremendous consequences will a continuance in your present bondage lead! Cry mightily to God, that he would rescue you from it, "deliver you from the power of darkness, and translate you into the kingdom of his dear Son ||."

\* Heb. vi. 15.

† 1 Cor. x. 13.

‡ Rom. xvi. 20.

§ 1 Cor. xvi. 13.

|| Col. i. 13.



## JESUS CHRIST.

### SECT. 4.

*Jesus attended on John's ministry—called certain disciples—went to a marriage-feast to Cana, where he turned water into wine—celebrated the passover at Jerusalem—purged the temple—did not trust himself with some professed converts.*

It may be difficult to assign to the various incidents in the history of Jesus their proper time and place; nor is it of any consequence to our plan. We shall touch upon the principal of them, and nearly according to the order wherein they occurred, as far as that can be ascertained. But we attend not to any critical inquiries for settling the chronology. Let us be most anxious, while we are studying the character of the Saviour, that we may know him as "the way, the truth, and the life," and that he may "be formed in us, the hope of glory."

We have beheld him, at his baptism, publicly anointed and set apart for his great work, on which, after his temptation in the wilderness, he prepared to enter. He did not, however, open his ministry at once, or display his glory by a sudden blaze, but in a gradual manner, as men could bear it.

His familiar companions were few, and those few of no considerable rank in life, taken from common, and not the most creditable, occupations, fishermen, tax-gatherers, &c. In the calling and uniting of these to himself, he discovered his power and his grace, and exhibited a specimen of his general conduct through the succeeding ages of the church. Notwithstanding all the wonders he performed, and that fulness of evidence by which he proved his mission and divinity, he

he would have been universally despised and rejected, had not an almighty influence been exerted, by which the hearts of some were inclined to receive and follow him\*. He might have commanded the services of more than twelve legions of angels; and therefore his condescension was the more remarkable in selecting a few obscure persons for his intimate associates and principal agents.

After his temptation, it should seem that he took up his abode for some time near the place where John was baptizing, probably with the view of attending upon his ministry; for it is evident that he appeared among his audience one day after another. Thus he became more publicly known, while John attested the miracle which had been wrought at his baptism, and repeatedly directed the regard of his hearers to him, declaring his high character and office, as the propitiatory Sacrifice for the sins of a guilty world †.

This occurred before Jesus had begun to preach, or had attached so much as a single follower to himself. Such a testimony, however, soon drew the attention of two of John's disciples to so extraordinary a Person. The one was Andrew the brother of Peter; the other, it is probable, was the Evangelist who relates the fact, and who frequently forbears to mention his own name. In the same manner many have been induced to seek the acquaintance of the Saviour, through the report of others, especially through the information of those who have truly beheld his glory. Nor do any seek in vain. He observes the first motions of their hearts, when they sincerely turn to him, and affords them the most gracious encouragement. He will then prevent their inquiries, by revealing himself to them, as he did in the case before us. He marked the attention of the disciples, who were watching his steps; with great condescension invited them to accompany him home; and admitted them to a free and delightful intercourse with himself.

\* Newton's Eccles. Review, p. 60. † John i. 28, &c.



And who, that have obtained the knowledge of Jesus, will not burn with a desire to recommend him to the notice and esteem of their friends? Have we not a brother or a sister, whom, through a plain and faithful testimony of our experience, we may introduce to the Saviour? Thus it was, by the declarations and influence of Andrew, that Peter was brought to him, and immediately taken into his service, under a new and significant name. Every visitant met with a kind reception from him; nor will any, who sincerely apply, be at this time rejected.

But all his disciples do not come to him in the same way. Some, we have observed, owe their knowledge of him, and their first good impressions, to their connexions in life; while others are called, not through any previous acquaintance with religious persons, but by an immediate, and as it were visible, exertion of divine grace. He is "found of them who sought him not\*." He speaks suddenly, not to their ears only, but to their hearts, prevents their objections, overrules their purposes and desires, and makes them "willing in the day of his power†" to alter their course, and follow a new Master. Thus, upon his removal to Galilee, he no sooner met with Philip, than he said unto him "Follow me;" and the man was induced from that hour to forsake his former occupation, and become the attendant of Jesus.

What joy and pious exultation will a discovery of the Saviour excite in the true believer! No wonder that he feels the warmest affections of gratitude, love, and zeal, and hastens to spread the influence around him. Philip, unable to contain the rapturous delight now produced in his soul, and wishing others to be as happy as himself, took the first opportunity of telling his friend Nathanael that he had found the promised Messiah.

Here a different character is presented to us. Nathanael, probably, as a sincere worshipper of God, like many others, "waited for the Consolation of

\* Isa. lxx. 1.

† Psal. cx. 3.

Israel;" but, though an upright man, and under the best impressions, he was still shackled by the influence of popular prejudice. He could not admit that any good thing, much less so illustrious a Person as the Saviour of the world, could arise from the infamous town of Nazareth. He was induced, however, by the mild expostulation and advice of Philip, to examine and judge for himself. On this occasion we admire the compassion and tenderness of Jesus to the weakness and folly of those who truly desire to know him. So far from upbraiding Nathanael with his ignorant and rash conclusions, he expressed the warmest approbation of his integrity, and proposed him to the notice of others, "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" This honest inquirer could not but be astonished by such a declaration from one whom he had considered as an entire stranger; and, being referred to a particular place of retirement, where probably he had been engaged in devout meditation and prayer, and where Jesus assured him that his eye was upon him, a powerful conviction broke in upon his mind. At once he saw his whole heart exposed to view, he felt his doubts and scruples to be removed, and acknowledged the presence and glory of the divine Saviour: "Rabbi," said he, "thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel." This undisguised and bold profession of his faith obtained a gracious acceptance. Jesus replied, "Thou shalt see greater things than these;" adding, that from that hour he should behold such a train of miracles as if heaven itself were opened in attestation of his mission. Thus likewise, in all cases, the sincere convert shall be favoured with increasing light, and strength, and comfort; "for unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance\*."

We perceive, through the whole of this history, that the grace of God operates in a sovereign manner. Here were two of a family, three of a city, called to the knowledge and love of Christ, while the greater part, perhaps of their friends and neighbours, remained

\* Matt. xxv. 29.



strangers and enemies to him. Even so it is now. He is confessed, loved, and glorified, by a few persons in a town, and frequently by such as were previously connected together by kindred or acquaintance. These, too, are so opposite to the rest in sentiments, principles, and practice, that "they are men wondered at\*." If any should be disposed to ask a reason for this, we have nothing to answer, but cry out, in devout admiration, "Even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight†." Hence also we observe a variety in the cases of his people; and therefore we should not be forward to condemn any one merely because his religious experience, in some unessential parts, differs from that of another. Let us not arrogantly prescribe unto God, but bow before him, and acknowledge that "the Judge of all the earth will surely do right." Instead of censuring the "diversities of his operations," let us adore the riches of his mercy. If the most disobedient and rebellious be willing to submit unto Jesus, he will graciously receive them. Their misapprehensions, fears, and unbelief, may for a time prevent their recourse to him; but no sooner do they discover a real desire to become his disciples, than he meets them with expressions of his kindness, admits them to a familiar communication with himself, and "fills them with joy and peace in believing."

Let us, then, make the application to ourselves, and ask, Are we "the called of Jesus Christ?" It is of little consequence comparatively by what particular means we have been affected; but are we indeed brought to the knowledge and love of his name? Do we possess that warmth of affection, that ardent zeal for him, which these young converts showed? Do we, like them, bear witness, "We have found the Messiah?" And are we disposed to "follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth?"

Soon after our Lord's arrival in Galilee, he, and the few disciples whom he had now attached to himself, were invited to a marriage; probably the marriage of a

\* Zech. iii. 8.

† Matt. xi. 26.

relation, since his mother and some other of his kindred were there\*. He was not inattentive to the calls of social life, nor wanting in any offices of respect and kindness to those with whom he was nearly connected. He condescended, therefore, to be present upon that occasion, and to partake of the entertainment. Our church has inferred from this circumstance that "he adorned and beautified the holy estate of matrimony." Doubtless he testified his approbation; nor do his professed followers show any real sanctity, or promote his cause among men, by despising that institution, which is declared to be "honourable in all †." The religion of Jesus does not require that moroseness and entire separation from society, into which some weak, but pious, persons have been led, through the fear of conforming to the world. They have made Christianity appear with a gloomy and forbidding aspect, by representing the most temperate convivial meetings as altogether profane, and on this ground refusing to mix with them. Our Lord's example teaches us, not indeed that we may at any time give into rioting and excess, or indulge a light and dissipated spirit, but that it may be right and expedient, on certain occasions, to use a greater freedom of conversation and intercourse with our friends, than our general habits or wishes may allow.

There was one circumstance which added a peculiar lustre to this marriage, as it proved the means of displaying the miraculous power, and confirming the character, of Jesus. Probably there was no affluence in the family, and, on account of this extraordinary Guest, there might be a larger company than had been expected; so that there was not a sufficiency of wine. The mother of Jesus represented to him the defect, hoping, and perhaps intimating, that he might supply it by his own divine agency. She met with a rebuke, indeed, for seeming to direct him in any supernatural operation, since, where the Godhead was

\* John ii. 1, &amp;c.

† Heb. xiii. 4.



to be exerted, he owed her no obedience, and could not be subjected to her control \*. Yet, while he declared that the proper season for his interference was not arrived, it is plain, from her injunctions to the servants, that he gave her cause to believe her proposal would soon be complied with.

Accordingly, at the time which he thought most suitable, he proceeded to work the very miracle she had wished for, and suddenly converted a large quantity of water into wine of the most exquisite taste and quality. This astonishing effect was produced without the intervention of any visible means, merely by his own sovereign will, and before many witnesses. Such also was the superior excellency of the new wine, that it immediately excited the notice and admiration of the company.

Our Lord's conduct, on this occasion, has been shamefully misrepresented, as if he had exerted his divine power to promote the purposes of intemperance. I know not by what profane ridicule some persons have aspersed the character of Jesus, as though he had been in reality, what his enemies of old insidiously described him, "a gluttonous man, and a wine-bibber †." They triumph in this little narrative, supposing it to prove, what they could wish, that there is nothing criminal in sensual entertainments, protracted even to excess.

What will not human depravity pervert? It can turn that into poison which was designed for salutary food. Accordingly, there are those, who have attempted to justify the most flagitious actions from the sacred writings. It almost moves one's indignation that so infamous a reproach should be cast upon

\* The answer of Jesus to his mother, "WOMAN, what have I to do with thee?" to an English reader may convey the idea of harshness and disrespect. That it was meant as some kind of check or reprehension is allowed; but the appellation of "Woman" implied no want of proper regard, since, in those times, and in the Greek language, the same address was usually made by servants to their mistress, and even by subjects to a queen.

† Luke vii. 34.

the holy Jesus. Is it, then, conceived possible, that he should not only remain in the company of drunkards, but work a miracle for the sake of lengthening out their merriment? What more blasphemous assertion could Satan himself advance? We have no reason to conclude but that every thing in this meeting was conducted with the utmost decency and temperance, and that our Lord improved the opportunity for the spiritual instruction and edification of the guests. In his conversation on the most private occasions, can any instance be adduced which can vindicate or encourage, we need not say a licentiousness of manners, but even a trifling gaiety of mind? The "lovers of pleasures" will gain no advantage by appealing to his conduct, but only betray their own deformity upon a comparison of themselves with his perfect excellence.

The misrepresentation seems to have arisen from that address to the bridegroom; "Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine; and, when men have well drunk, then that which is worse; but thou hast kept the good wine until now." This, however, describes merely what was usual at entertainments, and has not any necessary reference to that particular occasion; or, admitting that it had, it would not prove that any of the company then assembled were in a state of intoxication. The word itself, rendered WELL DRUNK, does not always mean excess; as it is applied by the best authors to cases wherein temperance was observed.

This miracle, like all the rest which Jesus wrought, was, probably, designed to promote the most benevolent and useful purposes. That large increase of wine was a recompense to the master of the house for his kindness and hospitality, and might be considered as a token that they who receive Jesus and his disciples shall not lose their reward. It was evidently calculated to display his high character in a more illustrious manner than had been done before; for he then "manifested forth his glory, and his disciples believed



believed on him;" their faith was confirmed, and they were the more encouraged to forsake all, and to follow him, when they saw such striking proofs of his power.

We do not forget that he furnishes a better entertainment, and invites us to feast with him at his table, while he bestows spiritual blessings with a liberal hand. He says, "Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled\*." The knowledge of his love will afford an inconceivably greater delight to the soul than the most exquisitely rich wine to a refined taste. In general, too, he reserves "the good wine" till the last: he communicates much happiness to his people from the first, but the end will be most glorious indeed. With respect, therefore, both to his providence and his grace, we rejoice in his all-sufficient provision and support.

Soon afterwards he went up to Jerusalem to celebrate the passover, a festival of peculiar importance among the Jews, at which the attendance of all their males was required. This particular observance does not obtain with us; but we are under indispensable obligations to wait upon God in the public means which he hath appointed. Let us learn from Jesus, then, to pay an exact and punctual regard to all the sacred ordinances.

Immediately upon his arrival at Jerusalem, he repaired to the temple, where a remarkable transaction occurred. Among other profanations of that holy place, the outward court was grossly violated, probably through the covetousness of the priests; for an open market was held in it, to the disturbance of devout worshippers. The service of God might be urged in excuse, as the people were here accommodated with their respective offerings. But Jesus felt a pious indignation at the shameful abuse, and set himself to reform it. "When he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove out of the temple" the profane traders, "and the sheep and the oxen; and

\* Prov. ix. 5.

poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables; and said unto them that sold doves, Take these things hence; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise." Such an interference of a Person who possessed no human authority was singular indeed! It amounted to no less than a full declaration of his prophetic character, and of his peculiar relation to God. In this view it will appear proper and consistent, like many of those significant actions of the old prophets, by which, as the messengers of Heaven, they instructed and admonished the people\*.

So uncommon an exertion could not but excite the public notice. His disciples beheld it with surprise, yet saw in it the completion of an ancient Scripture, which they considered as descriptive of that very spirit by which he was then actuated: "The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up†." Regardless of his own safety, he was concerned only for the glory of God in the due administration of his service. Must we not perceive and admire the power as well as the zeal of our Lord in this extraordinary occurrence? For whence was it that those who were occupied in merchandise submitted without opposition to one of such low rank and estimation in life? They seem to have felt, not merely a consciousness of guilt, but a secret and awful dread of their Reprover: and this effect we are disposed to ascribe to a supernatural impression upon their minds. By the very same influence, the persons who afterwards came to apprehend him, notwithstanding their malice and their fierceness, were struck to the ground before him.

Some, however, among the Jews, called him to account for this proceeding, and demanded a proof of his divine commission. The very action which he had performed might have been accepted as evidence; but probably they wished to find fault, rather than

\* Jer. xiii. xix. xxvii. Ezek. iv. xii. Zech. xi. See Bishop Hurd's ingenious discourse on Christ's driving the merchants out of the temple.

† Psal. lxxix. 9.



know the truth. Instead therefore of giving them any direct answer, he replied, as he usually did to cavillers, in a parabolical manner. "Destroy this temple," said he, "and in three days I will raise it up." This they understood not; but afterwards, in a perverted sense, they made it the ground of a charge against him\*. It was meant as a prophecy of his own resurrection, that infallible proof of his divine character, and in that view was recollected by the disciples, to the increase and confirmation of their faith. Thus it frequently happens that the very same Scriptures, and the very same doctrines, which are an offence and a stumbling-block to some, are to others the source of joy and consolation. Let us look well, in all our researches, to our motives and dispositions, and receive the word of God "in an honest and good heart."

While we profess to be satisfied that Jesus should purge the temple at Jerusalem from profane attendants, let us ask, Are we such worshippers as he will approve? Is there no violation of the house of God among ourselves; no irreverence which requires reformation? Is that holy place never turned into "a house of merchandise?" Are our minds never employed there in settling temporal accounts, and in various schemes of trade, as if we were in the midst of a market? What, then, would Jesus say, if he were to appear amongst us? And let us remember, that "all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do†." We should endeavour, therefore, to leave the cares of the world at a distance, "that we may attend upon the Lord without distraction‡." "Take these things hence," for they are most unsuitable to his sacred courts.

Jesus, we have seen, publicly asserted his high character at Jerusalem, and in the midst of many adversaries. He spake with an efficacy, which silenced, at least, if it did not convince, his opposers: but did any truly receive him? Many were so struck with his

\* Mark xiv. 58.

† Heb. iv. 13.

‡ 1 Cor. vii. 35.

miracles (which yet are not recorded) that they acknowledged him to be the Messiah, and professed to believe in his name. But they were such as, our Lord perceived, were not to be depended on. There was in them something unsound, or shamefully defective. Either they were false-hearted, with declarations of faith, love, and zeal, waiting only for an opportunity to betray him to his enemies; or else, if sincere, they possessed not a proper firmness and courage, and dared not to stand forth in defence of his cause. Even a friend, who is afraid or ashamed to espouse your interests, is not entitled to your confidence. You will not think yourselves safe in his hands; and therefore, from a proper regard to your own welfare and security, you will be backward to trust him. Such prudence is indispensably necessary in religious as well as temporal concerns. A little experience will teach you not implicitly to rely on every professor. You ought not, indeed, to suspect hypocrisy in all because you may have found it in some: a jealous temper is inconsistent with Christian love. But a cautious reserve and circumspection, towards many of those who discover an attachment to the Gospel, are highly expedient to protect you from various snares. This you will learn from Jesus, when "he did not commit himself unto them" who are said to have "believed in his name."

We must not overlook the reason assigned for his conduct: "He knew all men, and needed not that any should testify of man; for he knew what was in man." But is it not the exclusive prerogative of Almighty God to "search the heart and try the reins?" Yet this is asserted of Jesus: he perceived all the secret purposes and hidden motives of those who would have joined themselves to him, and at once detected the base hypocrisy which lurked within their bosoms. Let us stand in awe and fear for ourselves. Known unto him are our various states, principles, and desires. Let each one ask himself, Of what sort is my profession of love to Jesus? What was it which first induced



induced me to declare myself his disciple? Am I unfeignedly devoted to him; and may his cause be safely committed to me?

There is no creature "that is not manifest in his sight." If there be a Judas, a mere pretender to sanctity, "a ravening wolf in sheep's clothing," let him tremble at the thought that the eye of Jesus penetrates through all his disguises. Or, if you want courage publicly to avow your real sentiments of regard for the Gospel, so that you might easily be tempted to betray it, is not this a meanness and inconsistency, of which you ought to be ashamed before him?

The general case is, many among ourselves are called Christians, and say that they believe the Scriptures, because by the favour of Providence they were born and educated in a Christian land, and they are content to take up with the religion of their fathers and their country. Is not this the sole reason why some are not Pagans or Mahometans? But is this the faith which Jesus will approve? No: he will not be imposed upon by our saying Lord, Lord, in an empty form of words, with which our hearts do not agree. We pray, therefore, not only to "have a name that we live," but to possess "the faith of the operation of God," whereby, being vitally united to Christ, and abiding in him, we shall produce the fruits of righteousness, to the glory and praise of God." Amen.

## JESUS CHRIST.

### SECT. 5.

*Jesus, consulted by Nicodemus, declared to him the nature and necessity of regeneration—the operation of the Holy Spirit—the appointed method of deliverance from condemnation—and the different states and characters of those to whom the Gospel is sent.*

WE have not yet seen any promising appearances of success, upon the first opening of our Lord's ministry at Jerusalem. His strenuous exertions in purging the temple could not but excite a commotion through the city; and, though his claims were not generally regarded, many were, at least, convinced of his divine mission by the miracles which he wrought. Very few of higher station gave any serious attention to him, as that contemptuous question implied, "Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him \*?" But we are here introduced to one of that very rank, who sought after Jesus, with an earnest desire to be acquainted with his doctrine.

Nicodemus, a person of consequence as a magistrate, and a member of the great council the sanhedrim, probably too a man of learning, and, as a Pharisee, exact in all religious observations, paid him a visit: but it is remarked that "he came by night †." He might be afraid or ashamed to have it known, aware that a free and open intercourse with Jesus would bring upon him reproach and opposition; and therefore, to conceal it from public notice, and preserve his reputation, he took advantage of the privacy which is afforded by the darkness of evening.

\* John vii. 48.

† iii. i, &c.

But,



But, allowing that he was under a very improper influence of the fear of man, he was not thereby prevented from applying to this divine Instructor for information in the truth. Our Lord, who never rejected or discouraged a sincere inquirer, overlooking or not upbraiding his weakness, received him with kindness, and with freedom declared the most important mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. He constantly spoke with a regard to the circumstances and dispositions of his audience, and opened the Gospel, more or less, as they could bear it. Here was no scornful captious disputant, but an humble teachable scholar, seeking direction in the way of righteousness. And here we shall find, within a few verses, a more clear and explicit representation of the great system of Christianity, than in any other passage of equal compass, throughout the four Evangelists. It is recorded for our benefit, and every particle of it concerns each of us as much as it did Nicodemus himself. May we, like him, be willing to sit at the feet of Jesus, and hear his words, "which are able to make us wise unto salvation!"

How gracious and condescending was our Redeemer, in giving his time and his company for the instruction of an individual! The salvation of one soul is inconceivably more important than all the momentous affairs of mightiest empires, which employ the councils and armies of princes. The minister of Christ, therefore, who, like his Master, is attending to the spiritual welfare even of a single person, has a more honourable post, and a better object in view, than the statesman or the hero, on whom the eyes of thousands are fixed.

The main subjects of the conference with Nicodemus may be reduced to four.

I. The nature and necessity of regeneration.—This being the first thing which our Lord insisted on, we conclude that the doctrine lies at the very foundation of Christianity. "We know," said Nicodemus, "that thou art a Teacher come from God; for no man can do

do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him." Such an address, acknowledging that Jesus was a Prophet divinely commissioned, implied a desire of receiving instruction from him. Without any preface or apology, the Saviour began to explain the religion which he came to set up, and with peculiar solemnity declared an entire renovation of mind to be universally and indispensably requisite: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." As if he had said, "Dost thou believe I am come from God? Then I, the faithful Witness, assert this great truth. Dost thou inquire after the kingdom of God? Be assured that none can be a member of it, who is not so totally transformed in his inward dispositions, as to become a new creature."

The Jews, and especially the Pharisees, boasted of the privileges of their birth, as the descendants of Abraham, and depended on their scrupulous attention to external rites and ceremonies. They supposed, too, that, whenever Messiah should appear to establish his government, they should have more than a preference, an exclusive right to its advantages. In opposition to this gross delusion, our Lord maintained that their extraction from the most excellent progenitors, their religious education and profession, and all their outward observances, would not secure to them the blessings of his salvation; but that all, of every character, rank, and nation (the self-righteous Pharisee, no less than the idolatrous Gentile), must receive such a thorough change of heart, as may properly be described by being "born again."

We are aware that much pains are taken, not to deny our Lord's assertion, for that is express, but by subtlety and refinement to explain away its meaning. "To be born again," it is said, is only a strong eastern metaphor, which implies a renunciation of former errors, whether Jewish or Pagan, and a profession of Christianity. Let us try this interpretation by other passages. "Whatsoever is born of God  
overcometh



overcometh the world \*." And can such a conquest be ascribed to every one who is called a Christian? We have continual and lamentable proof to the contrary. Equally absurd is the notion that baptism constitutes regeneration. This, indeed, is the external symbol; the water, which is applied to the body, fitly representing the operation of the Spirit in cleansing and purifying the soul. There is a peculiar propriety in offering up solemn prayers, at the administration of that sacrament, that the inward and spiritual grace may accompany the outward and visible sign; and thanks may be given to God for those promises which encourage us to expect the blessing. But "whosoever is born of God sinneth not †:" and is this to be affirmed of every baptized person? Whatever we may charitably hope concerning infants, the public and habitual profaneness of many adults is a decisive proof to the contrary.

It is said, then, that "to be born again" is to reform the life, and pay an exact regard to the duties of morality. This, we grant, is highly expedient and necessary, and is an effect which will flow from regeneration; but it may, in some measure, be produced without it. For do not many "make the outside clean, whose inward part is full of wickedness ‡?" But the change of which we speak originates within, and is properly a renovation of the heart, in which corrupt and carnal affections are subdued, holy spiritual desires and tempers are implanted. It is, therefore, "a new creation," so that the man is, as it were, made over again, not as to his body, which suffers no alteration, but as to the dispositions of the mind: his depraved nature is rectified. The language is metaphorical, we allow; and who ever denied it? but some meaning was intended to be conveyed in the figure, and certain modern explanations have subtilized it into nothing. If Jesus designed only to inculcate an external reformation of conduct and regularity of morals, he used expressions too strong, or,

\* 1 John v. 4.

† v. 18.

‡ Luke xi. 39.

at best, very dark and intricate, which perplex rather than instruct. On this interpretation the metaphor is absurd, and all the solemnity of our Lord's address mere trifling; for he has rendered that obscure which in plain words would have been easily understood. Had this been the sense, Nicodemus would not have wondered; nor would Jesus have spoken of it as a mysterious doctrine.

But, if we give the metaphor its full force, there is a beautiful consistency and grandeur in the passage. The Jewish ruler was perplexed, and betrayed his ignorance of spiritual things by the foolish questions he proposed. Many acute and learned men have likewise discovered great absurdity by their objections to the truth here advanced; and even among such the renovation of the soul has been made a subject of profane scorn and ridicule. Jesus, however, replied only by repeating his former assertion, and declaring the necessity of receiving from the Holy Spirit a more excellent principle than we can derive from our parents by the natural birth. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Every thing produces its like: and if it be an allowed maxim, that "none can bring a clean thing out of an unclean\*," the offspring of fallen man must universally partake of his depravity. But the Holy Ghost communicates to the soul a new and divine nature, which resembles that blessed Agent in purity and goodness.

None, therefore, should put off the subject to others, as if it were requisite only for gross and abandoned sinners to be born again. Would you say, Why should I be disturbed about the matter, since my conduct is regular, my dealings fair, and my tempers amiable? You forget, surely, that we all spring from the same corrupt original. The necessity of regeneration arises not from the peculiar circumstances in which some men may be placed, or the degree of guilt they may have contracted, but from the degeneracy of human

\* Job xiv. 4.



nature itself, which we all, without exception, equally partake of, though different persons may discover it in different ways. Probably you cannot explain the mode in which the effects of the fall are transmitted to us, for the subject does not accord with "philosophy and vain deceit;" yet our Lord expressly declares, that, upon our first entrance into the world, we bring with us a carnal principle, which is opposite to God; and surely the universal condition of the human race is enough to prove that there is not one who does not feel a strong propensity to evil. This being granted, it follows, at once, "We must be born again."

Without such a renewal of the mind, we shall remain in a state of alienation from God, and therefore can have no part in the Messiah's kingdom of grace. That being a kingdom of righteousness, those, only, who are changed into the divine likeness, can relish its holy and spiritual precepts. Neither can we enter into the kingdom of glory, so long as we continue under the influence of "the flesh," which is "enmity against God." We are thereby unfitted for maintaining communion with him: he cannot admit us into his presence with such a disposition; nor can heaven itself afford any enjoyment of happiness.

Of how great importance is it, then, to inquire, Am I born again? Are my tempers and affections sanctified? Let us not be satisfied with an external decency of behaviour, and an honourable conduct among men; for, though highly beneficial to society, they do not necessarily imply a right state of the heart towards God. Yet let not the doctrine be abused, as if it militated against the interests of morality. The change will be manifested by an uniform series of virtuous actions. As birth from the womb is the beginning of animal life, so that, which we speak of, we maintain to be the commencement of a life, new, holy, and spiritual. It will be discerned by its fruits: we do not, we cannot, flatter those whose conversation is unprofitable, vain, and ungodly, that they ever were "partakers of the divine nature."

It is asked, In what way, or by what particular means, is this renovation effected? To answer the inquiry, and to guard against mistakes, we consider,

II. The operation of the Spirit in producing the change. Many are not properly aware of their own inability, and therefore, with great earnestness, and strong resolutions of amendment, themselves undertake the work, for which they are utterly unfit. The consequence can be no other than repeated and painful disappointments. Their plans fail; their purposes are broken: temptations prevail against them; so that they "labour in the very fire." Confusion and despair must ensue, unless they are willing to be indebted to the God of all grace, and cry to him for help. Then he will arise for their deliverance, and make his own strength perfect in their weakness.

No stream can be more excellent than its original source; for all the waters will take their tincture from the fountain whence they spring. From man's depraved nature nothing truly good can be derived. He is under an incapacity, from his disposition as a fallen creature, to recover himself. Indeed the metaphor of the new birth implies that we cannot effect it any more than bring ourselves into existence. The work is the work of God: and, accordingly, he who is "born again" is said to be "born of God," and "of the Spirit\*;" and the change is represented by such things as must of necessity be ascribed to the exertion of an almighty Power. It is a new creation; "for we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works†." It is a resurrection from the dead; nor can we possibly restore to ourselves the life we have lost. "But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ‡."

This doctrine, we grant, may be perverted to a bad and dangerous purpose: but the abuse does not

\* John i. 13. iii. 5. † John v. 1.

‡ Eph. ii. 10. † ii. 4, 5.



detract from its truth or excellence. Let us improve it to our own advantage, and learn to be more deeply humbled before God, and not to depend on our most vigorous resolutions; but, while we form plans of amendment, to pray with importunity, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me \*." We should be encouraged to "work out our own salvation, with fear and trembling," when we know that "it is God which worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure †." "He shall deliver the needy when he crieth, the poor also, and him that hath no helper ‡." By an invisible but effectual influence, he suggests serious thoughts, excites good desires, produces holy principles, and raises our carnal affections to high and heavenly things. Who will deny that the God of spirits can have such an access to our minds?

We attend not to metaphysical subtleties and refinements, nor attempt to explain the mode in which the Holy Ghost performs his operations. But, not dreading the charge of enthusiasm, we maintain that, without his powerful interposition and continual assistance, we cannot be Christians indeed. The subject is mysterious; there is a secret in it which God hath thought proper to conceal; which, therefore, it is not needful, or perhaps possible, for us to know. Is this urged as an objection? Recollect that the doctrine was represented to Nicodemus in this very light: our Lord taught him to expect the same difficulties in grace which occur in creation. "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth." Thus the Spirit acts upon the human mind in a sovereign and unsearchable manner; we cannot direct or control his influence; and, though we clearly discern his effects, it would baffle all our understandings to trace and explain the methods and reasons of his operations. The subject

\* Psal. li. 10.

† Phil. ii. 12, 13.

‡ Psal. lxxii. 12.

may appear to be involved in so many and great difficulties, that our faith may stagger, and we may cry out with Nicodemus, "How can these things be?" But if we sincerely desire instruction, he, who condescended to the ignorance and prejudices of that "Master of Israel," will have compassion on our weakness, and "guide us into all truth."

Such is the pride of man, he is not content to "know in part;" and hence frequently the vain pretender to right reason rejects the grand doctrines of revelation, when he finds in them unfathomable depths. But let us remember "the certainty of those things wherein we have been instructed," and on whose authority we have received them. "Verily, verily," says our divine Teacher, "We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness." There are matters still further removed from our comprehension; and if already we are disposed to object, "how shall we believe, if he tell us of heavenly things?" Yet how shall we controvert his testimony? "No man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man, which is in heaven." He declared himself, then, to be in heaven, at the very moment he was conversing with Nicodemus upon earth. And if we admit this account, why not admit, what is not more unintelligible, the influence of the Spirit in regenerating and sanctifying the soul?

Jesus, having asserted his own authority as a divine and infallible Witness of the things of God, proceeded to inform the Jewish ruler of the important benefits resulting from his mission; and hence we learn,

III. The deliverance of sinners from condemnation through his gracious interposition. This doctrine should be considered in connexion with that already established; for it is a part of the same glorious plan; and the one is as interesting to us as the other. The foundation of both is laid in man's fallen condition; for, if that could be disproved, the whole system would be shaken, and fall to the ground together.

We



We are aware that it is an offensive truth, but we are compelled by the strongest conviction to maintain that "we were by nature the children of wrath\*;" and it is clearly implied in our Lord's address to Nicodemus; for, while he opened the grand scheme of divine mercy, he evidently argued upon the supposition that we are in a state of ruin, obnoxious to justice. Thus, when he asserted "that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life," did he not plainly intimate that all, considered only in themselves, without the remedy proposed, are liable to perish for ever? From the very grace offered through the Saviour we infer that the whole human species, without excepting a single instance, stand in need of redemption; and that there is such depravity in their nature, as without restraint would infallibly lead them to final destruction. "God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved." Now, where would have been the peculiar mercy of forbearing to execute the sentence of wrath, if we had not deserved it? or of preventing the misery into which we are not likely to fall? Let us enter deeply into this important truth, without which the Gospel will be no more to us than an entertaining story; it may furnish amusement, but will not promote our salvation. Are we affected as we ought to be with a conviction of our guilt and danger? What plea can we offer in arrest of judgment? Let us thankfully accept the proposal of deliverance, and urge with our offended God the mediation of his own Son.

The dispensation of grace is here fully opened to Nicodemus. God is represented as looking down in compassion on our ruined race, and, through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, effecting redemption. He interposed not from any view of merit in us, or the expectation of receiving a recompense; but we are taught to ascribe our rescue to his own sovereign,

\* Eph. ii. 3.

free, and abundant mercy. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son." Well may we exclaim with the Apostle, in devout admiration, "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins\*."

Jesus, then, according to the divine counsel, laid aside his glory, and assumed "the likeness of sinful flesh," that he might make reconciliation. He came down from heaven, not armed with vengeance for our destruction, but inviting sinners of every description to return unto God, with assurances of a full remission. Yet forgiveness is bestowed, not merely by an act of indemnity, but in consideration of an adequate satisfaction. The righteous character of God is preserved and displayed, while his justice demands a sacrifice, and the Saviour undertakes to answer that demand. "Without shedding of blood is no remission†;" but "it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins‡;" and therefore Jesus appeared for the very purpose of submitting to the death of the cross, that he might "obtain eternal redemption for us." Thus he declared to Nicodemus, with reference to the peculiar nature of his sufferings, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up." His death was not, as some vainly talk, an accidental matter; for he himself predicted and spake of it as the appointed means of procuring our pardon and salvation. It was the end of his incarnation, and the object he kept in view during the whole of his abode on earth.

We rejoice that he hath made a full atonement by his blood, and therefore we can encourage every trembling penitent to "look unto him and be saved," because he is "the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world§." If the Lord God should deal with you according to the strictness of his

\* 1 John iv. 10.

† Heb. ix. 22.

‡ 1 x. 4.

§ Isa. xlv. 22. John i. 29.

righteous



righteous law, your condemnation would be just and unavoidable. But the Gospel proclaims mercy to all, without exception, who feel and deplore their own wretchedness. Refuse not the gracious tender, for "whosoever believeth—shall not perish, but have everlasting life." To suppose that your application to Jesus will not succeed, is to cast a foul reproach upon him, as if he meant not what he said, or could not make good his own assurances. Give an unreserved credit to his word, and plead his name in a confident expectation of obtaining reconciliation with your God.

Let us not trifle in a business of unspeakable importance, but remember that life and death are set before us. Let us therefore impartially examine ourselves, while we consider,

IV. The different states and characters of those who receive, and of those who reject, the Saviour. Our Lord insisted on this subject in very solemn terms at the close of the conference, probably that he might leave an awful impression upon the mind of Nicodemus, and that from him the other members of the sanhedrim might be warned of their danger, if they should continue in unbelief. The ministers of Christ, in like manner, should admonish their hearers, and draw the same line of distinction between them.

Such as fix their entire regard on Jesus, and derive all their expectations of pardon and salvation from him, while they "abhor themselves, and repent in dust and ashes," are immediately received into the divine favour, however numerous or aggravated their iniquities have been. The sentence of the law, to which they would otherwise have been exposed, has now lost all its force: the Lord himself looks on them with delight, and will preserve them to his heavenly kingdom. "He that believeth on him is not condemned." How gracious the declaration! What a firm foundation for our hopes! What a continual source of comfort! Christians, should it not draw forth your warmest gratitude and love, and excite you

you to holy diligence and zeal? Why should you now be terrified or distressed by any occurrence? Depending on the assurance of your Redeemer, with devout admiration say, "O Lord, I will praise thee: though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortedst me \*."

How different the case of unbelievers! Possibly they may assume certain specious appearances of virtue, and pretend a high regard to morality; yet, not being impressed with any deep conviction of sin, they have no true value for the Saviour, and refuse him the submission he requires. On that ground, they will perish eternally. Since faith in the Son of God is the only appointed means of deliverance from condemnation, all who are destitute of this principle, whatever else they may plead, remain under the sentence of death. Indeed, without any consideration of their contempt and rejection of the Gospel, as transgressors of the divine law they have incurred the threatened penalty; and who shall acquit them? Jesus Christ "was manifested to take away our sins;" but they can receive no benefit from that grace which they despise. Nay, this very circumstance aggravates their guilt, and not only ensures their punishment, but will increase their misery for ever. "He that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God." Unbelief, therefore, is an offence peculiarly heinous, and more destructive than any other, as it effectually bars the door of mercy.

Various objections are urged against this representation. It is said that, while faith is insisted on as the only point of distinction, the grand criterion by which the states of men will be finally determined, we derogate from the holiness and justice of God, as if he paid no regard to their moral characters. We reply, that none possess any moral excellence in themselves, previous to their acceptance with God on the terms of the Gospel. But the grace of God produces

\* Isa. xii. 1.



a difference; and such a difference as proves that he acts agreeably to his own perfections, both when he saves and when he condemns. This is the description here given by our Lord himself.

Sinners will be judged for their contemptuous neglect of means afforded them; and it will be found that the real cause of their rejection of the Saviour is a rooted aversion to that purity of heart and conduct which his Gospel requires. "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reprov'd." We have here, then, an account, which cannot be controverted, why so many disregard the gracious offers of salvation. It is a deformed and odious picture of all unbelievers, and is drawn by him who cannot err. They are obstinately attached to wicked habits; and therefore they will not hear or honestly examine the doctrine which would detect their depravity. They may probably assign some other reason, profess themselves ready to listen to argument, and complain of the want of evidence. But the true cause of their infidelity is their own insincerity. On this ground the sentence of condemnation will proceed against them; and the equity of it will be universally allowed.

The faithful Christian exhibits an exact contrast. He is not only justified by grace, but renewed in the spirit of his mind. A total change of conduct, therefore, has taken place with him; nor is this a hypocritical pretence to sanctity: he is inwardly what he appears outwardly. He is not afraid of detection, nor will he shrink from the most searching examination. "He that doeth the truth cometh to the light, that his deeds may be made manifest, that they are wrought in God." His holy practice, then, will be a public testimony of his sincerity, and an undeniable proof that the Lord God, through the whole plan of salvation, maintains a constant regard to his own righteous character.

racter. The believer will prefer no claim of merit; but his works, which are performed in faith, will be exhibited to the view and admiration of men and angels, and will obtain the approbation and reward of his God and Judge.

A sure test is here afforded us for the trial of ourselves. What reception do we give the Gospel? Do we "come to the light," and desire to be minutely searched by it? If not, how shall we defend or account for our contempt? Have we such reasons to assign as we dare allege before the tribunal of Heaven? Or rather, would not our very excuses, if properly weighed, betray our hypocrisy and hatred of all goodness, so as to overwhelm us with confusion? While, therefore, the word of salvation is sent unto us, let us "take heed, lest there be in any of us an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God \*."

\* Heb. iii. 12.



## JESUS CHRIST.

### SECT. 6.

*Jesus, retiring from Jerusalem to Galilee, passed through Samaria—conversed with a woman of Sychar—replied to his disciples, who brought him food—abode two days with the Samaritans, and had many converts—went to Cana, and cured the son of a nobleman of Capernaum.*

“JESUS hath left us an example, that we should follow his steps \*.” It will, therefore, be necessary for us to contemplate this illustrious pattern with serious attention, that according to our measure we may copy after it. “He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also to walk, even as he walked †.” Among other particulars, which are proposed for our imitation, his unwearied diligence and zeal, in accomplishing the grand object of his mission, were very remarkable. His ministry, though contracted within narrow limits, was most laborious. For the last three years and a half, which is supposed to include the whole of his public life, he travelled much, and preached often; and that too with great fatigue both of body and mind. If we accompany him from place to place, we shall observe him constantly intent upon his work, foregoing his own ease and temporal comfort, and cheerfully meeting extreme sufferings, that he might be useful. In one word, “he went about doing good ‡.”

Have we nothing to learn from this description? Is it not likewise incumbent upon us to be active, for

\* 1 Pet. ii. 21.

† 1 John ii. 6.

‡ Acts x. 38.

the short season we may continue here? And should we not desire, not so much to live long, as to fill up our portion of time, whatever it may be, in an honourable and profitable manner? If we have the mind of Christ, we shall eagerly seize every opportunity, wherever we may travel, to glorify God, and promote the salvation of our fellow-creatures; and those we shall account good journeys indeed, which have contributed to the conversion of a sinner. But, alas! they, who follow the Saviour most closely, still remain at a great distance from him. Even his faithful servants may justly be covered with confusion, when they think how little they possess of his diligence, self-denial, fortitude, and zeal. How preposterous are sloth and sensuality in those who are called by his name!

It is probable that our Lord continued at Jerusalem, and in the neighbouring parts of Judea, for some months after his conference with Nicodemus. But at length, his popularity having rendered him offensive to the Pharisees, he judged it expedient to retire from their observation. He therefore removed to Galilee for his own safety, yet keeping in view the great object of his mission\*. A prudent attention to our own security, when we are exposed to the assaults or stratagems of enemies, is in no respect inconsistent with religious fidelity and courage. We should not shrink from danger, when we meet it in the path of duty; but in every other case to hazard our lives is rashness and presumption.

In passing from Jerusalem to Galilee, he must of course go through the intermediate country of Samaria, which was then inhabited by a kind of degenerate Jews, mixed with Heathens, who had introduced many idolatrous and superstitious customs into the professed worship of the true God †. Here he designed to make known his high character, and leave a blessing behind him; for which purpose a remarkable occurrence opened the way. The providence

\* John iv. 1, &c.

† Dr. Frid. Connect. Part 1. Book 6.



of God can so order the minutest circumstances, as to render them all subservient to his own gracious plan of bringing sinners to himself.

When he approached to the city Sychar (probably the same as Sychem in the Old Testament), being exhausted with his long journey, he sent his disciples into the town to buy food, and himself sat down weary, hungry, and thirsty, by a noted place called "Jacob's well." Thus it appeared that he was very man, partaker of our weaknesses, and subject to our natural wants and infirmities, since he stood in need of a cup of water to refresh him. Just at that time a woman of Samaria drew near, whose necessities had led her to the well; and Jesus solicited her assistance to quench his thirst. This was not the whole of his intent, but served chiefly as an introduction to his main design of saving her precious soul, and making her an instrument of his glory. How great is his condescension, how tender his compassion, who waits not for the application of sinners, but meets and prevents them with his goodness!

The woman expressed her surprise at his address, since such violent prejudices subsisted between the Jews and Samaritans, that they would neither ask nor receive any favours from each other. Ah! what mischiefs spring from a party spirit! How often does it obstruct all religious and social intercourse between those who are connected by the closest ties! Jesus, however, passing over the dispute between the two nations, immediately gave a turn to the discourse, that he might lead her to the knowledge of himself. He intimated that he had far better, even living, water to bestow; and that, if she had understood his real character, she would have implored this blessing at his hands. Her reply discovered entire ignorance of his meaning; but Jesus, with an astonishing meekness, bearing with her misapprehensions, explained and confirmed his former assertion. He declared that the water which he proposed  
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to communicate was so superior to the spring before them, that it would effectually and for ever quench the thirst, and be a source of eternal blessedness to the soul. The woman still resting in gross and carnal notions, like Nicodemus on another occasion, considered him as speaking only of common water, endued with some special virtues. Alas! how unapt we are to form any spiritual conceptions! "Our soul cleaveth unto the dust\*;" and it is with extreme difficulty that we admit any other ideas than those of earthly objects. On this account, they, whose office it is to teach and to admonish, should be furnished with much patience and forbearance, that they may not be offended or discouraged when their words are misunderstood. Though one method of instruction fails, another should be attempted. It will be peculiarly proper, in order to convey religious truth with good effect, to aim at the consciences of the audience, and endeavour to fix in them a deep conviction of guilt.

Thus our Lord, perceiving the poor Samaritan's insensibility and disregard of spiritual blessings, awakened her to a sense of her sinful and dangerous state, by setting before her some circumstances of her iniquitous conduct, which, however it might be concealed from others, was all exposed to his view. "Go, call thy husband," said he, "and come hither." She replied, "I have no husband:" upon which Jesus observed, "Thou hast well said, I have no husband; for thou hast had five husbands, and he, whom thou now hast, is not thy husband: in that saidst thou truly." This striking and unexpected discovery of the adulterous commerce in which she was then living produced the desired effect. She was instantly convicted, as if all her offences had been placed in array before her†. Yet, probably with a view to shift off so disagreeable a subject as her own wickedness, while she acknowledged Jesus to be a Prophet from heaven, she requested informa-

\* Psal. cxix. 25.

† John iv. 29.



tion of him touching the principal point in debate between the Jews and Samaritans. The latter retained only a part of the Mosaic law, and even that they had greatly corrupted. They had also erected a temple on Mount Gerizim, in opposition to that at Jerusalem; and each nation contended eagerly for its place, as well as mode, of worship.

Our Lord took the opportunity of explaining to the woman the dispensation of the Gospel then about to be established, assuring her that all distinction of places would shortly cease, so that men might every where have access unto God, and serve him with acceptance. He reproved the degeneracy of the Samaritans; and while he asserted that the salvation of God would proceed from the Jewish church, he foretold the abolition of their rites and ceremonies, and insisted strongly on the necessity of pure, fervent, and sincere devotion. "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." The solemnity of this address could not but affect her mind; and immediately she was led to mention her expectation of Messiah, the promised Deliverer, and of the reformation which he would introduce. Prepared, no doubt, as our Lord then saw her, to receive the declaration, without any further preface, or apprehension of danger from the discovery, he made himself known to her as the exalted Personage whom she looked for: "I, that speak unto thee, am he."

And did he ever finally leave any humble inquirer in suspense about his character, as the Saviour of the world? Does he not give all necessary information to every one who earnestly implores his direction? Yes, let us be encouraged to ask and wait for his divine teaching: "Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord\*." Nay, the grace of Jesus is so large and free, as to surpass all our conceptions. The history before us exhibits it as preventing grace. So far from disdaining this poor, ignorant, bigotted,

\* Hos. vi. 3.

lewd, and wicked woman, he first made the overture of mercy; or else, it should seem, she would not have sought after him. He is still acting the same kind and condescending part towards sinners of the present day. He sends a message of peace and love to you, and solicits your attention. Your past folly, your heinous iniquities, and inveterate evil habits, will be no objections or difficulties with him. He can instruct; He can pardon; He can sanctify. "Whoremongers and adulterers," so continuing, "God will judge\*;" but whoremongers and adulterers may be converted by the grace of Jesus, may become sincere followers of him, and then they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven.

Do we "know the gift of God?" Let us contemplate its excellency and value, till our hearts burn with the most ardent desires that this gift may be ours. Have we drunk of this "living water?" or do we thirst for the refreshing streams? If we retain our fondness for the vanities of the world, we are strangers to the "well of life;" for this would have satisfied the soul; this would have made every other enjoyment, in comparison, appear poor and contemptible.

Perhaps it may excite our wonder that a woman of Samaria, and such a woman, should obtain mercy, while many of the learned doctors and devout Pharisees at Jerusalem perished in unbelief. We adore the mysterious dispensation, and acknowledge it to be wise and holy. "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight†." Our Lord himself declared to many, who were highly esteemed amongst men, "The publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you‡." Let us beware, then, how we despise any, even of the lowest character. "There are last which shall be first§." Without reflecting on others, let us give diligence for ourselves "to make our calling and election sure||."

\* Heb. xiii. 4.

§ Luke xiii. 30.

† Matt. xi. 26.

‡ xxi. 31.

|| 2 Pet. i. 10.



Nor let the great duties of Christianity be forgotten, or neglected, in an angry contention for some of its outward observances. We are called to "worship God in spirit and in truth." Let us unite, then, in this one grand concern, and lay aside our disputes about inferior matters even in religion. If others will maintain warm and furious debates concerning places or modes of worship, let us "exercise ourselves unto godliness." For, however attentive we may be to forms and ceremonies, so long as we do not love as brethren, and serve God with inward ardour of devotion, we have not known Jesus, nor rightly understood the design of his appearance.

The conference with the woman was probably interrupted by the return of our Lord's disciples. After purchasing provision in the town, they brought it for the refreshment of their Master. Upon their approach, they were astonished to find him in familiar conversation with a woman of Samaria; for they still retained all the bigotry of Jews. Yet, suppressing their wonder, they came and besought him to take some necessary sustenance. He, however, unmindful of his own weariness and hunger, and intent only on the grand object of his life, the saving of immortal souls, discovered no inclination to eat, but spake of receiving a better entertainment than what they were acquainted with. His meaning was misapprehended, as if he referred to nothing more than common food; for even the disciples were slow in their conception of spiritual things. To correct their mistake, he then declared more explicitly, "My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work." For, seeing that he should have a multitude of converts among the Samaritans, he rejoiced, and called on them also to exult in the prospect: he encouraged them to labour in the work of the ministry, from the expectation of an abundant and glorious harvest, which would issue in eternal life.

If we, like Jesus, are intent on the duties of our respective

respective offices, we may be disposed, perhaps, on certain occasions, to neglect ourselves. It is not, indeed, incumbent on us to refuse our food, but the cause of God ought to be much dearer to us than our own necessary refreshment. Whatever be our vocation, an employment is assigned us by the providence of God. To it, therefore, we should attend, not with indifference, as if it were a secondary matter, but with the same eagerness and delight which we feel in gratifying our senses, or ministering to the support of our bodies. But do not many live, merely that they may eat and drink; "whose God is their belly?" How few inquire, what is the will of God; what is the proper work, which he would have them to finish? Even when we know our duty, are we not evidently averse to or weary of it? Not so the sensualist, when furnished with the object suited to his appetite.

Much of our Lord's address to his disciples is particularly applicable to ministers, who are "labourers in God's husbandry," appointed of him to sow, to reap, and gather in the harvest. Though their most strenuous exertions cannot ensure success, still they must be diligent and unwearied in cultivating the field committed to them, ever looking unto him "who giveth the increase." Nay, should no present fruit appear, it ought not to be concluded that all their pains are ineffectual. Others may "enter into their labours," and discover the benefit in succeeding generations. The final harvest approaches, when they shall receive their respective wages, according to their fidelity; and they will exult, not only in their own salvation, but in seeing those, who, through their ministry, were rescued from sin and misery, and conducted to eternal glory. Then what anthems of praise, what grateful acclamations, will be heard from every mouth, while "he that soweth, and he that reapeth, shall rejoice together!"

They who are anxious to save immortal souls will be glad to observe the eagerness of the people, like that



that of the Samaritans, in flocking after Christ; and, when multitudes are crowding to the house of God, they cannot help saying, Surely, this is like the white appearance of the fields, before the harvest. May their prayers and expectations be answered by a plentiful increase in their different places, and by an abundant "ingathering" into the heavenly garner, which may be their crown of rejoicing in the day of the Lord Jesus!

But, to return to the woman of Samaria: the words of Jesus made a deep impression upon her mind. Such was the height of her transport, that she forgot the trifling business on which she had come to the well, and left her water-pot behind. Filled with wonder and joy, and with an earnest concern for her friends and neighbours, she ran and proclaimed among the inhabitants of the city that the Messiah was at hand, and invited them to accompany her to him, that they might be convinced for themselves. How important is the conversion of one sinner, especially as it may lead to that of many others! You, who are acquainted with Jesus, will recommend him to the notice and esteem of every one with whom you are connected. You will persuade them to go with you to those ordinances where he has discovered himself to you, and be ready to say, "Come, and see." Perhaps they may be influenced from your report to hear and examine, and may "obtain like-precious faith with you."

Multitudes of the Samaritans, having credited the testimony of the woman, came forth from the city; and, anxiously desirous to be confirmed in their dependence on the Saviour, by a personal intercourse with him, they solicited his continuance. Never did he refuse to gratify the wishes of such as truly sought him, or to improve an opportunity of usefulness. He therefore yielded to their request, and abode two days, preaching among them with acceptance and success. So effectual was his word, that, though he appears not to have wrought any miracles there

there in attestation of his doctrine, many were convinced of his high character, and professed a sincere subjection to him.

We inquire, then, whether you have discovered the same eagerness which the Samaritans did to cultivate an acquaintance with Jesus. By the ministry of his servants in the Gospel, he himself draws near to you; but have you entreated his presence and continuance? We read of those who besought him to depart out of their coasts: and something of a similar spirit is manifested among ourselves. But, if you cordially desire him, he will not merely visit you in a transient manner; he will make his abode with you. Many have borne witness concerning him, and, like the woman, invited you to come and see for yourselves. Have you credited their report? Or on what testimony is your faith built? Does it rest entirely on the accounts of others, without any particular application to yourselves? Or have you so experienced the power and grace of Jesus, that you can say with the Samaritans, "Now we believe, not because of thy saying; for we have heard him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world?"

When his designs in Samaria were accomplished, he proceeded on his journey, but declined, for the present, going to Nazareth, where, he was aware, the people entertained strong prejudices against him: and in general it is allowed, "that a prophet hath no honour in his own country." He turned aside, therefore, into another part of Galilee, and came again to Cana, where he had changed the water into wine. Here he met with a favourable reception; for many of the inhabitants had beheld the miracles which he had done at Jerusalem. Here also he displayed his divine character by a fresh exertion of his power, more glorious than the former.

During his stay in that town, an application was made to him by a nobleman from Capernaum, which was at a considerable distance, in behalf of his sick,  
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and, as he supposed, his dying, son. In general, not many rich and honourable persons of the world resorted to him: but sharp troubles will often constrain those who have been most averse from Christ to implore his presence and assistance. Here was one of high rank, an attendant, probably, in the profane court of Herod, who, having heard of the fame of Jesus, hastened to him; and besought him, in compassion to his distress, to heal his child. This circumstance alone proved that he possessed a measure of faith, though mixed with much unbelief. Perhaps he had previously declared that he would not be convinced except he saw some miracle performed. For our Lord spake to him in language of reproof, which implied such a disposition; "Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe."

The nobleman, however, unwilling to take a denial, urged his request with greater importunity: "Sir, come down, ere my child die." He seems to have had low conceptions of the power of Jesus, as if his bodily presence were necessary for performing the cure. But Jesus, while he answered his prayer, gave him an indisputable proof that his exertions were not limited to place, and that he could heal by a word, even at a distance. He said therefore, "Go thy way, thy son liveth." A declaration so astonishing, we might have supposed, would have staggered his faith; but he was enabled instantly to believe it, and he went home in full expectation of his son's recovery. Nor was he disappointed; the happy news met him on the road; and it appeared that the child was perfectly restored at the very time when Jesus had assured him of the favourable event. Thus a beloved life was preserved; and, what was a matter of far greater consequence, many persons obtained the knowledge of salvation; for not only the nobleman, but all his family together, submitted to Jesus, with a firm and unreserved reliance upon him.

And, after such abundant evidence, shall we fluctuate

tuates in our principles? Shall we any longer doubt the power or the grace of Jesus? Is any case too hard for him? Or will he reject any humble application for mercy? We learn, from this example, to recommend our children to his care. If they are not afflicted with bodily sickness, their souls are universally diseased. Let us pray, therefore, "Lord, come, and heal my son." But let us not forget our own necessity; and therefore, while we ask for our offspring, let us implore a blessing for ourselves. Our faith may, at first, be weak, and our notions dark; but if we are encouraged to have recourse to Jesus, and earnestly solicit his gracious help, he will extend his compassion to us; and we shall shortly glorify him for his great salvation.

While the character of Jesus is exhibited, and indubitable proofs are brought of his ability and readiness "to save unto the uttermost," is there one among us who does not need, or desire, his assistance? Oh, the fatal blindness and wretched stupidity of men! They neglect and despise the Saviour, to their own everlasting destruction. But you, whom affliction weighs down, or convictions of guilt terrify, behold the merciful Redeemer, and say, "Lord Jesus, to whom else can we apply? Thou only canst relieve us." He is still the same, and, though at a distance, can instantly remove your complaints. His bodily presence is not necessary: He can speak the word, and your health shall be restored, your peace of mind established. Only believe his own gracious declarations: Go your way, expecting what he hath promised, and, according to your faith, so shall it be done unto you.