

SAINT PETER.

CHAP. V.—SECT. 1.

Peter, a fisherman, brought to Jesus by his brother Andrew—took a miraculous draught of fishes—was appointed an Apostle—walked on the sea—confessed Christ—one of his most favourite and zealous attendants—was warned at the last supper—slept in Gethsemane—defended his Master—forsook and denied him—repented—had an interview with Jesus after the resurrection.

A GREAT variety of natural dispositions appears even among those who possess the grace of God. Each man's peculiar temper gives a cast to his religious conduct, and, while it distinguishes him from others, exposes him to peculiar snares and temptations. Those of lively affections are apt to be unguarded and precipitate, and frequently offend through indiscreet and unseasonable exertions of zeal. But the calm and sedate, however they may deliberate and judge wisely, often want the fervour, courage, and activity, which are necessary for difficult undertakings and extensive usefulness.

The history now proposed to our consideration will evince the propriety of these remarks. Of all the persons who accompanied our Lord, none appears more conspicuous than St. Peter. He has been styled the Prince of the Apostles, and not improperly, for he generally stood forth as their leader in every transaction. The excellence of his character, to which Jesus himself gave the strongest attestations, demands our esteem. We must admire his warm attachment to his Master, his fidelity, fortitude, and
vigour.

vigour. Yet we allow that he had failings, and on one melancholy occasion was betrayed into very dishonourable conduct. He was naturally sanguine, bold, and confident; and, through the influence of this his prevailing temper, he sometimes appeared forward, rash, and presumptuous. We do not attempt to justify or palliate the faults of pious persons; but we ought not to be vehement in our censures. Let not the careless and the indolent, who loudly condemn the imprudence of some lively Christians, flatter themselves that their caution and inactivity are more pleasing to God than the honest warmth of those, who, like Peter, may occasionally over-act their part. The latter may be often wrong, but the former, being destitute of love and zeal, are never right. It is incumbent upon us to regard the Saviour, not with indifference, but with fervency of affection, and on every suitable opportunity to exert all our abilities for promoting his glory.

Peter was an inhabitant of Bethsaida in Galilee, where, though Jesus preached often, and performed many miracles, the Gospel was generally rejected. Here he carried on the mean and laborious occupation of a fisherman, for which the place was conveniently situated. His low rank and education, perhaps, rendered him insignificant, if not contemptible, in the eyes of the world; but he obtained favour with God, and an honourable distinction in the church. The Lord seeth not as man seeth: He often passes by the great, the noble, and the learned, and, to accomplish his purposes, selects such instruments as are thought weak and unfit for the work. He chooses an Apostle for the publication of his rich mercy, not from the courtiers of the Roman emperor, or the philosophers of Athens, but from the poor fishermen of Bethsaida. By such a dispensation He exhibits both his power and his grace, and gives a public declaration "that no flesh should glory in his presence."

Peter was the brother of Andrew, and probably,
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like him, had been a disciple of John the Baptist, before his acquaintance with Jesus *. Andrew no sooner obtained the knowledge of the Saviour, than he conducted Peter to him. How many have reason to thank God for their pious friends, whose conversation, instructions, and exhortations, have brought them into the way of peace and righteousness! Let us look with compassion on the souls of our associates and relatives, recommend the Gospel of Christ to their acceptance, and labour assiduously for their spiritual welfare. Jesus received the new convert with kindness, and showed by his address that he was not ignorant of him, though a stranger. He also intimated a design of taking him into his service, by giving him a new name, expressive of peculiar firmness and steadfastness. He said, "Thou art Simon" (such being his former appellation), "the son of Jona: thou shalt be called Cephas, which is, by interpretation, a stone," or "a rock." We, with the ancient church, have adopted the name of PETER, whose signification is the same with that of Cephas, and which was the term used to explain it.

It is probable that St. Peter continued with our Lord for some time, and then, returning for a season to his old employment, dwelt at Capernaum. There we find that Jesus went into his house, and miraculously healed his wife's mother of a fever †. There, also, Jesus met with him following his occupation, entered into his ship, and directed him to cast his net into the sea ‡. He had laboured all the night without success; but now, at one draught, he took an immense quantity of fishes. This was evidently designed as an omen for good, and an encouragement to venture upon his Master's service with the greater confidence. The fact so plainly ascertained the dignity of the Saviour, that Peter was overwhelmed with reverential awe, knowing himself unworthy to stand before this holy and exalted Personage. With the deepest self-abasement, occasioned by an impressive

* John i. 40—42. † Luke iv. 31, 38, 39. ‡ v. 1—11.
conviction

conviction of guilt, he cried out, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." If we have formed proper conceptions of the divine purity, we shall not wonder at the fear and confusion here expressed. The most excellent men have, in like manner, confessed themselves unfit to appear in the presence of God, and, when favoured with his nearest approaches and clearest revelations, have declared the strongest abhorrence of themselves.

But Jesus immediately replied with words of comfort to his trembling servant, and reminded him that he must prepare for nobler employment, and from that time be occupied with remarkable success in catching men. The call went to his heart with irresistible energy; he did not then want any further inducement to become a stated follower of his Lord. Every worldly consideration gave way to higher motives: "he forsook all," his fishes, nets, vessels, friends, and relations, that he might devote himself to the work of the ministry.

Soon afterwards he was appointed to the apostolic office, and sent out, with eleven others, to preach the Gospel, and confirm its doctrines by miraculous operations*. Whenever the twelve are enumerated in the New Testament, Peter's name stands in the front. He was among the first who were taken into Christ's service, and always distinguished himself by his zeal and activity. But, though we allow a peculiar excellency in his character, we cannot favour the conclusion, that he possessed authority over the rest. There is no appearance in the sacred history of any such supremacy or infallibility as the church of Rome ascribes to him. No superiority of this kind was ever granted by the Saviour, demanded by Peter, or acknowledged by his brethren †. The arrogant claims, therefore, of those who call themselves his successors, the bishops of Rome, are absurd and impious. They have no foundation in the Scriptures, and

* Matt. x. 2. Luke vi. 13, 14.

† Matt. xxiii. 8—12. Acts xv. 13, &c. 2 Cor. xii. 11, Gal. ii. 11. produce

produce very mischievous effects. But, waving the consideration of those errors, we should pray that all the preachers of the Gospel may obtain a measure of the same grace, and manifest the same holy principles, by which St. Peter was influenced. So shall no respect to their interest, reputation, or connexions in life, prevent them from promoting, to the uttermost, the cause of Christ, and the enlargement of his kingdom.

We observe Peter's constant attachment to his Master, and readiness to profess that regard. On one occasion, when he saw Jesus walking upon the tempestuous sea in the night, at first he was intimidated, as well as his companions; but afterward, hearing the gracious voice of his Lord, he cried out, "Lord, if it be thou, bid me come unto thee on the water *." This address evidently proceeded from faith and love, and yet betrayed much forwardness and self-confidence. To check these wrong principles, by giving him a painful proof of his weakness, which he was little aware of, Jesus permitted him to venture upon the deep.

We behold Peter, then, upheld by a divine power, treading on the boisterous waves, as on dry ground. But at length, when he attended to the violence of the wind, not retaining, as he should have done, his dependence on the Lord, his courage drooped, and his body began to sink. He expected nothing but immediate destruction, and exclaimed, in great anguish, "Lord, save me!" This occurrence, which was an awful presage of what he afterwards experienced, should have taught him more diffidence and meekness of spirit. Jesus immediately afforded him the necessary assistance, caught him as he was on the point of being overwhelmed, and conducted him safely to the ship. At the same time he sharply reprov'd him for his unbelief, through which his attempt had failed: "O! thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?" Alas! how often have we been frustrated in our good

* Matt. xiv. 22—33.

designs on the very same account! For a season, perhaps, we seemed as if we could trust the Lord; but, when we took off our eye from him, and thought of our dangerous situation, our fears prevailed, and, if Jesus had not rescued us, we must have utterly perished.

On another occasion, when many disciples forsook the Saviour, and the Apostles themselves appeared ready to depart, Peter, with his usual fervour, professed his firm regard and unshaken resolution not to desert his Master*. "Lord," said he, "to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life; and we believe, and are sure, that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God." This was indeed an evidence of the sincerity of his faith, and the warmth of his affection. With such views of the Saviour, we also shall adhere to him, and abhor the proposal of seeking any other refuge. If our souls are established in a full persuasion that he alone can give us peace and everlasting happiness, then we shall be willing to persevere through every difficulty and danger in his service.

Jesus inquiring of his disciples what opinions were formed concerning him, St. Peter stood forth, and made that noble confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God †." His Master, in reply, pronounced him truly blessed, as having obtained this clear knowledge and strong confidence, not by any peculiar discernment of his own, or information from others, not by any human abilities or assistance, but by the distinguishing grace of God, and illumination of his Spirit. Jesus added, in very remarkable terms, that Peter, as his significant name implied, should be used as a "Rock;" that on him, as one of its main supports, should be built the glorious edifice of the church; and that, however opposed by Satan and his agents, it should continue to rise, and stand firm and impregnable against the most violent assaults ‡.

* John vi. 66—69.

† Matt. xvi. 13—19.

‡ He is the only sure foundation on which his church can rest, 1 Cor. iii. 11. Others understand that the

He declared, further, that he should appoint this favoured Apostle to be a principal officer in the kingdom of grace, and deliver its keys into his hands, as an emblem of authority committed to him, for the administration of its affairs. But, with whatever powers Peter was invested, he possessed them only in common with his brethren, as they also afterwards received a commission of the same extent*. On no ground can the tyrannical usurpations of the popes of Rome be justified from the grant here given to Peter. It is impossible for them to show that it contains, or that they derive from it, a right to absolve and to condemn, as they presume to do.

But, waving that unprofitable controversy, let us rejoice in the security of the church under the care of Jesus. It will be opposed by strong and malicious adversaries: but he has engaged for its protection and continuance. Do we, as living stones, constitute a part of this spiritual building? Then we shall firmly resist every attack. Can we adopt Peter's confession with a full conviction of its truth? And is that conviction produced in consequence of divine light communicated to the mind? O, how great the privilege and blessedness thus to be acquainted with the character and salvation of Jesus!

Soon afterwards the Apostle received a sharp reprehension. Perhaps, elated by these singular declarations in his favour, and still entertaining ideas of a temporal kingdom, he could not bear to hear his Master foretel the passion then approaching, and even dared to censure him on that account: he said,

the confession of faith, which St. Peter here made, is the Rock referred to, since the prosperity and even the existence of the church depend on the doctrines included in that confession. But the connexion of the passage does not seem to be well preserved by either of those senses; and the author conceives that there is no more impropriety in considering Peter as a support of the church, than in representing the Apostles and Prophets as the foundation on which it is built, Eph. ii. 20. Rev. xxi. 14. Such an interpretation derogates not from the honour of Christ; nor can it favour the Popish notion of Peter's supremacy.

* John xx. 23.

“Be it far from thee, Lord; this shall not be unto thee *.” The address was in every respect unsuitable: it expressed great ignorance and presumption; and therefore he was rebuked for it with an unusual severity. Jesus perceived by what wrong affections his servant was actuated, and, it should seem, he felt the suggestion as a temptation to himself: he replied, “Get thee behind me, Satan; thou art an offence unto me; for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.” Alas! how easily may such, as are most exalted in grace, be turned aside by a depraved nature, and both speak and act under the influence of carnal principles, by which, in effect, they promote the purposes of Satan! Let us inquire, Do not we, like Peter, object to the cross, and, as if we had lost our spiritual taste, lay our plans for worldly advancement, through covetousness or ambition? Do we not show, on some occasions at least, that we do not perfectly understand or comply with the humbling and self-denying scheme of the Gospel? What are we then doing but taking part with the devil, and opposing the designs of Jesus?

St. Peter was not only a companion of Christ, together with the other Apostles, but numbered among his most intimate friends, and intrusted with the most unreserved communications of his mind and counsel. He was one of the favoured three who saw the Saviour transfigured on the mount: and he, in particular, expressed a rapturous delight in the vision and the society there assembled. He cried out, in his ecstasy, “Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles, one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias †.” This honour he never forgot: many years afterward, and not long before his death, he attested the fact, and insisted on it as a convincing proof that he had “not followed cunningly devised fables ‡.” We do not look for such revelations of Christ; but his people still enjoy his spiritual presence, and by faith behold his glory.

* Matt. xvi. 21—23. † xvii. 1—6. ‡ 2 Pet. i. 16—18.

At those distinguished seasons, when taken up with him to the mount, they feel a pleasure which is unutterable, and wish to have no more to do with terrestrial concerns. Their language then is, "Lord, it is good for us to be here!"

When certain collectors applied for the accustomed tribute, Peter readily agreed to pay their demand, and, by his Lord's directions, caught the fish, which furnished the money for that purpose*. In one place he proposed the question, how often he should forgive an offending brother †? In another, after receiving a solemn admonition concerning the danger of riches, he declared that he had forsaken all from an attachment to his Master, and expressed a hope of obtaining a recompense ‡. His professions of regard were sincere; yet we discover in them some degree of self-confidence and carnal expectations.

We omit various circumstances of a less interesting nature, in which his name is introduced; observing only, that, throughout the whole history, he stands distinguished by the ardour of his affection for Jesus, and by the overflowings of his zeal upon all occasions. He was faithful, bold, and vigorous, in the work assigned him, ever watching the motions, and springing forward before all the rest to execute the will, of his Lord. O that both ministers and private Christians possessed a larger measure of his fervour and diligence! Alas! we lose many opportunities of usefulness, through the coldness of our hearts in spiritual things, and dishonour our principles by the defect of our services.

We now advance to a part of the sacred narration which may justly excite much fear and distress. A mournful spectacle is exhibited in the fall of this eminent Apostle. We presume not to allege any excuses for his conduct, which was sinful in the extreme, and marked by peculiar aggravations. May we be properly affected by the view, and learn to distrust ourselves! How preposterous it is for crea-

* Matt. xvii. 24—27. † xviii. 21. ‡ xix. 27.

tures so depraved and helpless to be lifted up with vain confidence! Who shall be able to stand, if God withdraw his support?

When our Lord celebrated his last passover, he instructed his disciples, in the most gracious manner, by the significant action of washing their feet*. St. Peter, surprised at his condescension, objected to his performing this menial office. He said, (and, it should seem, with real humility,) "Thou shalt never wash my feet." But Jesus taught him that he stood in need of a spiritual purgation, to which he should be willing to submit. Immediately the Apostle acquiesced, when assured that he could have no part in the Saviour unless washed by him. Let us learn to cry out for ourselves, under a sense of our defilement, "Lord, cleanse my polluted soul, and in every respect make me holy and acceptable to thyself!" Or, in Peter's words, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head."

Peter requested his Lord to explain the hints which he had given about his departure, and was then informed that he himself must follow him, not indeed at that time, but after some years' service in the church †. He considered the reply as containing an intimation of unwillingness in him to suffer with Jesus; and, feeling his heart warm with love, he boasted that he could instantly and cheerfully meet death in his Master's defence. The declaration accorded with his real sentiments, but savoured too much of presumption, and proved that he was not properly sensible of his own weakness and danger. To check this vain boasting, and put him upon watchfulness and prayer, Jesus represented, in a most affecting manner, that Satan, his subtle adversary, was about to assault both him and his companions with peculiar vehemence; that he in particular, after suffering a severe loss in the conflict, would be preserved from a total defeat, and recovered for the con-

* John xiii. 1—9.

† 36—38.

firmation of his brethren, in consequence of the Saviour's intercession for him*.

Such information, and from such a Person, we should suppose, was enough to strike a damp upon the Apostle's spirit. But he was yet too confident of his own strength to listen to the warning, and therefore he repeated the declaration, that neither bonds nor death should separate him from his Lord. Jesus then added a more express and tremendous admonition, solemnly affirming that before the morning watch, in the course of that very night, Peter would thrice disavow all acquaintance with him; yet even this caution did not produce the proper effect. He went out with his Master to Gethsemane, but not with sufficient humility, vigilance, or prayer. Upon the road he was again reminded of his approaching fall; but, still thinking himself incapable of such baseness and treachery, he again maintained with renewed asseverations, and in the most peremptory manner, that he would stand by his Lord in all extremities, and that, however the rest might act, he would choose death rather than deny him †. This was honest language; but it clearly betrayed that "haughty spirit" which "goeth before a fall ‡." It always bodes ill when men suspect others rather than themselves, and boast of their firmness instead of calling upon God for strength and protection. O how needful is that petition, "Hold thou me up, and I shall be safe §!"

When they came to the garden of Gethsemane, St. Peter, with the two other favoured disciples, James and John, was admitted to behold the Saviour in his deepest distress ||. There he received a solemn charge to watch with his Lord, and pray against temptation. But, even on that occasion, he discovered a very sinful remissness. He neglected the

* Luke xxii. 31—34. † Matt. xxvi. 31—35. ‡ Prov. xvi. 18.
 § Psal. cxix. 117. || Matt. xxvi. 36—46. Mark xiv. 32—42.
 Luke xxii. 40—46.

directions given him, and, instead of being employed in holy exercises, fell asleep. His companions did the same; but a sharp reproof was addressed to him in particular, as he had been more confident than the others. "Simon, sleepest thou? couldst not thou watch one hour?" The injunction was renewed; yet again and again he sunk into the same excessive stupor. A poor preparation for the season of severe trial!

A scene of much terror, and one that foreboded a tremendous conflict, awaited the disciples and their Master. Jesus was apprehended by a band of armed men; yet we observe that St. Peter, on that event, still maintained an unshaken constancy and courage*. Remembering his vow, he drew his sword for the rescue of him he loved, and wounded a servant, who was probably one of the most forward among the impious crew. Thus, as he had determined, he hesitated not to hazard his life rather than forsake Christ: and, considering this forcible resistance, it is surprising that both he and his companions were not instantly cut to pieces. Rash and impetuous in his zeal, he forgot his own and their danger; and still more unmindful of the power he had witnessed, and the strain of doctrine he had heard, he foolishly thought to protect where protection could not be wanted, and scrupled not to use improper means. Jesus, therefore, reproved him, and reminded him, that, if any defence had been necessary, he could have procured thousands of angels for that purpose. Christians, whose natural disposition is sanguine, are in great danger of adopting violent measures, even for the truth's sake. But the cause of God is not promoted by such expedients. "The weapons of our warfare are not carnal †."

Peter beheld his Master taken, bound, and led away as a prisoner; and, perceiving him quietly submit to this treatment, he, together with the other

* Matt. xxvi. 47—54. John xviii. 1—11.

† 2 Cor. x. 4.

disciples, forsook him, and fled *. His boasted courage failed; and probably he began to tremble for his own safety. This was a sad change indeed. Yet he seemed to be soon recovered: recovered, alas! to fall the more scandalously. Not long after, he followed Jesus "afar off," evidently under an impression of fear. He wished to be upon the watch, that he might observe how the whole transaction terminated. He obtained admission into the place of trial, and, to avoid suspicion, mingled with the crowd. He sat down among the idle and profane servants: what poor society was this for an Apostle of Christ! There the temptation commenced; yet it was such as appeared in itself trifling: at least, he had withstood many, which we might have thought greater. But Satan was then permitted to have a strong ascendancy over his mind, and to render him, contrary to his natural temper, a most abject coward.

A certain female attendant in the high-priest's palace charged him with being a disciple of Jesus. He was instantly confounded, and expressly declared that he did not so much as know him. Perhaps shocked at his own words, he went out, and heard the cock crow. Did not that sound bring to his recollection the caution which he had received? Possibly this might be the case; yet immediately after that warning, being interrogated by different persons, he fell again; confirming his former denial of his Master with stronger asseverations, and even with an oath. An hour afterwards the accusation was renewed by fresh witnesses; and the third time this eminent, distinguished, and zealous Apostle, disavowed all connexion and acquaintance with Jesus. This he did in language which might be calculated

* Matt. xxvi. 56, 58, 69—75. Mark xiv. 66—72. Luke xxii. 54—62. John xviii. 15—27. St. Peter's fall is related by all the Evangelists; but none have described it in a more heinous light than St. Mark; and if, as is generally supposed, that Gospel was reviewed by Peter himself, and written even under his direction, this circumstance may be considered as an evidence of his integrity and sincere contrition.

to clear him from the imputation, but which we should have supposed could never come out of such a mouth: "he began to curse and to swear."

We stand amazed while we view the atrocious sin, with all its aggravations. If we have been preserved from so shameful a declension, O what thanks and praises are due to Him, who hath kept our souls! But this history will teach us not to presume on our imagined steadfastness. We are still liable to be tempted and overcome. Nay, there is no wickedness so heinous, which we may not be induced to perpetrate. Our danger is the greater, as we are constantly watched by a subtle and malicious adversary, who "desires to have us, that he may sift us as wheat." O let us be the more vigilant, and prepared to resist his attacks! There were some preceding steps which led to Peter's calamitous miscarriage. He depended upon his own strength, neglected to pray, and mixed with bad company. Let this be regarded and improved as a solemn caution to ourselves. Let us beware of those omissions and failures which are thought trifling: they may lead to the most fatal events.

Such cases are most lamentable; and yet the Lord God sees fit to permit them, and even renders them subservient to his own gracious purposes. His offending people are more deeply abased, while their painful experience testifies their total depravity and entire helplessness: they learn to walk more circumspectly, perceive more of the excellency and value of redemption, and become more cordially attached to the Saviour. There are persons, indeed, upon whom these instances have a bad effect: but they must answer for their own perverse abuses. If they are encouraged to sin, here is nothing which can justify their conduct. They prove their own desperate wickedness while they plead the examples of others; so that their very excuses will be turned against themselves.

The fall of Peter was scandalous, but not of long continuance.

continuance. The same night, and almost the same hour, he was restored and brought back to God as a weeping penitent. Immediately after his last profane declaration, the cock crew the second time; and, it should seem, that sound, which so exactly fulfilled the previous admonition given him, deeply affected his heart. But, more especially, he was awakened by the eye of his injured Master, who had been within the hearing of some of his impious speeches. "The Lord turned, and looked upon Peter; and Peter remembered his word." That look pierced his very soul: and yet, we apprehend, it was a look, not of indignation, which would have driven him to despair, but of the most compassionate regard: it upbraided him for his treachery, but encouraged his hope of forgiveness. Then he beheld the heinousness of his transgression; and, under the strong influence of shame, confusion, and pungent sorrow, he sought where he might hide his head, and vent the distresses of his mind. "He went out and wept bitterly." Where then is the promised sweetness of sin? Rather, what complicated miseries does it produce! How deep the wound which it leaves upon the conscience! Many, alas! are almost overwhelmed with anguish on account of their backslidings, and cry out, day and night, with a painful remembrance of what they have lost, "Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation*." Yet let them not say "There is no hope," since we here refer them to one who was recovered from his fall, pardoned, and again established with equal, if not with greater, strength.

We read no more of this Apostle till the morning of the resurrection. The interval must have been to him a season of extreme affliction, spent in prayers and tears. But, upon the first tidings that the Lord was risen, Peter, who was in John's company, ran with eager haste to see the sepulchre †. A celestial messenger, proclaiming the joyful event to certain

* Psal. li. 12.

† John xx. 1—10.

pious women, directed them to inform the disciples of their Master's design to meet them, and made mention of Peter's name in particular. This was calculated to comfort him, as it conveyed an intimation that he was not abandoned or forgotten *. Soon afterwards, on the same day, Jesus showed himself alive to him, before the rest of the Apostles had obtained that sight: and there was not one who stood so much in need of support and consolation †.

The Saviour, also, after his resurrection, favoured him with peculiar notice, in a very remarkable interview at the sea of Tiberias ‡. He appeared to Peter, and certain other disciples, who were fishing, and by his miraculous influence filled their net with large fishes. Peter, discovering his dear Lord upon the shore, instantly cast himself out of the ship, that he might swim to him, and testify the strength of his attachment. They dined together, and then a most affecting discourse ensued.

The former professions of the Apostle might seem to be rendered dubious, if not entirely falsified, by his late misconduct. Probably with a reference to this circumstance, Jesus now inquired whether his love was indeed greater than that of others, as he had once boasted. The interrogation conveyed a tender reproof, to which Peter replied only by appealing to Jesus, as acquainted with the state of his heart, for the sincerity of his regard. He was then commanded to give evidence of it by attending to his pastoral office, and feeding the meanest and weakest of the flock. This contained, in effect, a renewal of his apostolic commission, and therefore a full testimony of forgiveness. Thrice was the question proposed, and thrice did he call upon the Saviour, to whom his inmost soul was open, for the attestation of his integrity. But, having become more diffident of himself, he presumed not to intimate that he felt a stronger affection than the rest. As the charge,

* Mark xvi. 7. † Luke xxiv. 34. 1 Cor. xv. 5.

‡ John xxi. 1, &c.

also,

also, was thrice repeated, there could not remain a doubt that he was reinstated in his place. Jesus predicted that in his old age he should suffer a violent death, and glorify God in the pains of crucifixion, and concluded his prophecy with an injunction to follow the steps of his Master. Peter wished to be informed what would become of John, but received for answer, that, leaving the concerns of others, he must attend to his own, and labour to imitate the example set before him.

Here we pause, and stand in admiration of that grace, which can pardon, restore, and save, even the most heinous backsliders. "Return unto the Lord your God," you who "have fallen by your iniquity." He himself declares, "I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely*." O confess your baseness, and weep with genuine contrition for your aggravated offence! But consider, also, if you have obtained mercy, and God be pleased to employ you again in his service, what grateful acknowledgments of his love, what vigorous exertions to promote his cause, are due from you more than from others! You cannot expiate your guilt, or repair the mischief you have done; but desire, at least, to prove your recovery, exhort your brethren to maintain their steadfastness, and labour to bring again those, who, like yourselves, have been driven away. Let your great Exemplar be ever before your eyes. Follow him more closely and constantly than before: follow him even unto death, and you shall finally reign with him in glory. Amen.

* Hos. xiv. 1, 4.

SAINT PETER.

SECT. 2.

Peter proposed the election of a new Apostle—preached on the day of Pentecost—healed a lame man, and addressed the people—imprisoned—pleaded before the sanhedrim—detected Ananias—was again imprisoned, brought before the sanhedrim, and scourged—went to Samaria, Lydda, Joppa, and Cesarea—defended his conduct towards Cornelius—delivered from Herod—attended the council at Jerusalem—reproved by St. Paul at Antioch—his writings, and death.

THOSE vows and professions of repentance, which are not accompanied with its genuine fruits, deserve no credit. St. Peter received a particular injunction to prove his recovery by confirming the faith of his brethren, and feeding the flock of Christ*; and an evidence was given, through the whole succeeding part of his life, of a zeal unquestionably pure, and of a diligence which knew not, or complained not, of fatigue. "The Acts of the Apostles" have put his character beyond a doubt: the twelve first chapters chiefly relate to him, and demonstrate, by the strongest testimonies, that his contrition was sincere, and his subsequent conduct consistent and honourable. Many circumstances may be concealed from us: but enough is recorded to show that he obtained forgiveness, and continued for many years an extensive blessing to the church. As he lived, so we have reason to believe that he died, in the bold profession

* Luke xxii. 32. John xxi, 15.

and defence of the Gospel. May they, whose cases resemble his, learn in like manner to walk more circumspectly in future, labour more abundantly to be useful in their generation, and exhort others to beware of those miscarriages which have brought such anguish upon themselves!

When our Lord ascended into heaven with great triumph and glory, it is probable that Peter was one of those who followed him with their eyes till a cloud received him out of their sight; it is certain he was one of that faithful, though little band, which remained at Jerusalem, in a state of holy fellowship, and anxious expectation of the promised blessing*. He it was who addressed the church upon the apostacy of Judas, showing that the Scriptures were fulfilled in him, and that his place among the Apostles should be supplied by a fresh election.

On the day of Pentecost the Holy Ghost descended with miraculous influence upon all the twelve; but our attention is directed to St. Peter more than to the others †. Though it does not appear that he was distinguished above the rest by superior powers, yet he stood forward with peculiar courage. He first opened the grand commission of the Gospel, and the effect of his preaching, on that memorable occasion, was most visible and extensive. In his solemn discourse to the people, he replied to the scandalous reproach cast upon him and his brethren, and alleged that the gift of tongues, which excited such astonishment, ought not to be ascribed to intoxication, but to the extraordinary effusion of the Spirit, which had been expressly foretold. By a most decided testimony, he maintained that Jesus had wrought various unquestionable miracles, and, after being injuriously put to death, had been raised from the grave, according to David's prophetic description. He argued, that He, who expired on the cross, had taken his seat at the right hand of God, and, having fulfilled his own

* Acts i. 9, 13, &c. † ii. 14, &c.

promise in communicating so large a measure of the Holy Ghost, had proved himself to be the true Mesiah, the very Saviour who should come into the world.

An immediate and deep impression was made upon the minds of the audience. Many expressed the most pungent anguish and terror, while they earnestly implored direction from the Apostles. Peter instantly called them to the exercise of repentance, required them to be baptized in token of their submission to Jesus and dependence on his merits, and encouraged them to expect from Him the gift of the Spirit. How venerable did the preacher appear, when, with a holy fervour of zeal and love, he stood and besought the surrounding multitudes to be saved from that perverse generation! O that all the ministers of Christ possessed the like ardour, and that the labours of those who do exert themselves in the same honourable service were crowned with similar success! Let them lift up the standard of the cross, and doubt not that God will prosper their efforts for the enlargement of his kingdom.

We insist not in this place on the various miraculous operations performed by the Apostles, nor on the happy state of charity, peace, and piety, in which the primitive church lived together, as their very enemies observed with astonishment. That description would exhibit a pleasing picture, and strongly recommend our religion; but it does not immediately relate to the character of St. Peter.

Soon after the feast of Pentecost, he is again brought forwards on a very interesting occasion*. He went to the temple, in company with John, at the usual hour of prayer, when a poor man, who had been a cripple from his birth, solicited relief. "Silver and gold have I none," said this messenger of peace, "but such as I have give I thee: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk." A perfect cure instantly succeeded; and so public

* Acts iii. 1, &c.

was the case, that it excited general notice. Crowds of people flocked together, that they might see the wondrous persons whose words had given feet to the lame.

Peter sought not their applause, and therefore eagerly seized the opportunity of turning off their attention from himself to his dear Lord and Master, whom he affectionately commended to their regard. He boldly charged them with the most heinous guilt in having crucified the Prince of life, and exhorted them to repent and believe on Him, who was raised from the dead, that they might receive pardon and peace. He argued that Jesus had fulfilled their ancient prophecies, and justly demanded their submission. He stated the nature and excellence of the salvation proposed, declaring that their long-expected Messiah was sent "to bless them, in turning away every one of them from their iniquities." A similar mode of address, from those who labour in the Gospel, will be at all times proper. They also "preach not themselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord*." It is of necessity that they endeavour to fix upon the minds of their hearers a conviction of sin, without which the offer of deliverance will not meet with any cordial acceptance. They must cry aloud, "Repent ye, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord." They proclaim that "the Redeemer is come to Zion," and, while they exhibit his inestimable benefits, they maintain that those only can enjoy them who "turn from transgression †."

The zealous exertions of the two Apostles provoked the resentment of the priests and rulers, and occasioned their own arrest and imprisonment ‡. But they were greatly honoured, though cast into a dungeon. They had preached to good effect, as it appeared that the church received a large increase

* 2 Cor. iv. 5. † Isa. lix. 20. ‡ Acts iv. 1, &c.

through

through their word. On the day following they stood arraigned before the sanhedrim, being called to answer for their conduct. Peter was the speaker, and displayed an uncommon degree of courage; but at this we do not wonder when informed that he acted immediately and entirely under the influence of the Holy Ghost. He declared that the cure of the lame man had been wrought by the power, and through faith in the name, of Jesus. Forgetting his own situation as a prisoner at the bar, or disregarding his safety, he charged his judges with the murder of his Lord, whom he asserted to be raised from the dead, and warned them that by Him alone salvation could be obtained.

Such undaunted fortitude, in one whom they had despised as a low and illiterate person, confounded the council, and they knew not what steps to take. However, they strictly enjoined him not to presume to propagate the Christian doctrine: and, had the scheme been of human contrivance, it is probable that it would have been instantly defeated. But, as the work was of God, they could not overthrow it; their rage was vain, their threatenings ineffectual. Peter and John stood unmoved, and declared their determination never to desist from the cause in which they were engaged, appealing even to this malignant assembly for the justification of their conduct. "Whether it be right," said they, "in the sight of God, to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye." For that time they were dismissed, but with fresh menaces; and, when they had joined their brethren, the whole company united in prayer. They spread their case before the Lord, and entreated Him still to support and prosper them in the propagation of the Gospel. Their petitions obtained an immediate and favourable answer: the Holy Spirit came upon them, perhaps with some external tokens as before, and enabled them with renewed vigour to persist in the service of their Master.

Do not such examples make us ashamed of our

OWN:

own timidity? Is it not necessary for us to be as firm and undaunted in the profession of the truth as St. Peter was? Or will it be right, in any instance, to hearken unto men more than unto God? Yet are we not doing this while by dishonourable compliances we seek to evade persecution? You, who love the Lord, being persuaded of the excellence of your cause, should possess an unshaken courage. Whatever your enemies may threaten, by prayer and faith commit yourselves to Him, whose you are, and whom you serve, and then you need not dread any consequences. He will communicate to you more abundant grace, which shall be sufficient to sustain you in the severest conflict.

The church continued to increase and prosper; though the hypocrisy of some professed members produced a painful trial*. Ananias and Sapphira were convicted by St. Peter of the basest dissimulation, and instantly struck dead at his word. This circumstance, however, tremendous as it was, turned out "to the furtherance of the Gospel," which more evidently appeared to be the cause of Heaven. Our Apostle, in particular, was held in profound veneration: he wrought various wonderful cures, which are not minutely described; nay, his very shadow proved to many persons the means of miraculous recovery. Who, then, could refuse to be convinced that these men were indeed the messengers of the living God?

Still the Jewish rulers opposed, and, being filled with violent indignation, cast all the Apostles together into the common prison. Yet no bonds could silence these witnesses of God's truth. An Angel rescued them from their confinement; and by his direction they proceeded to preach the same doctrine as publicly and as earnestly as before. Again they were brought before the sanhedrim, when the high-priest expressed the keenest resentment because they had despised the injunctions and threatenings of the

* Acts v. 1, &c.

council. Peter undertook to answer, in the name of his brethren; and maintaining, as on a former occasion, that no commands of men would exempt them from obedience to God; he boldly declared the grand principles of the Gospel before his judges. He was evidently more solicitous to save their souls than procure his own deliverance, while he stated that the very Person whom they had crucified as a vile malefactor, being raised from the dead, and exalted to the highest glory, as a Prince and a Saviour, was ready to dispense the blessings of repentance and forgiveness.

His address increased the rage of the audience; and a proposal was made to take away the life of these troublesome men. But after some consultation they were dismissed, having been first scourged, and again charged to preach no more in the name of Jesus. This violence, however, damped neither their courage nor their joy. They accounted themselves peculiarly honoured in suffering for such a Master, and continued to declare his truth both in public and private, though with great apparent danger to themselves.

A more striking picture of Christian fortitude, faith, and zeal, cannot be exhibited. Do we not almost envy the chains and stripes of St. Peter and his companions? He has assured us that, "if we be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are we; for the Spirit of glory and of God resteth upon us*." But have we ever felt the influence of the love of Jesus, so as to be willing to give up ease, liberty, and life, for his sake? Do we regard him, according to Peter's doctrine, as "the Stone which is become the head of the corner?" Do we look up to him as seated on his throne in heaven, and imparting to every humble petitioner on earth repentance and remission of sins?

The intrepidity of the Apostle in the transactions now related forms a strong contrast to that part of

* 1 Pet. iv. 14.

his conduct when he was ashamed to confess his Lord before a servant-maid. And to what shall we ascribe this difference? In his base denial of Christ we see the weakness and depravity even of good men, and their liability to fall by those very temptations of which they are warned, and against which they have most strenuously resolved. But in his bold defence before the council we behold not so much the natural impetuosity and constitutional courage of his mind as the power of divine grace: we perceive that God can qualify his servants for the work assigned them, and support them in every danger. O, let us learn to maintain an entire dependence upon Him, and he will help us according to our need!

A. D. After some time the Apostles at Jerusalem, ^{34.} having heard that the inhabitants of Samaria had embraced the Gospel, sent Peter and John for the purpose of establishing them in the faith, and imparting to them some spiritual gifts *. Upon that occasion a singular case occurred. Simon, a noted magician, observing that the Holy Ghost was conferred by these two eminent teachers, ignorantly and impiously proposed to purchase the same power by a sum of money. Peter immediately rejected the offer with disdain, reproved his base hypocrisy, warned him of his danger, and earnestly exhorted him to repentance and prayer. He addressed himself to the sinner's conscience with plainness and fidelity. And will it not be allowed that succeeding ministers should in like manner, without reserve, "declare all the counsel of God?"

Having preached in different parts of Samaria, he returned to Jerusalem. During his continuance in that city he received a visit from the young convert and Apostle, St. Paul; yet neither then, nor at any other time, was such a supremacy acknowledged in Peter as the church of Rome pleads for †. No external persecution preventing him, he soon after-

* Acts viii. 14—25.

† ix. 27. Gal. i. 18.

wards took an extensive circuit, that he might spread the Gospel from town to town. "He passed through all quarters," testifying of Christ, and working miracles: so illustriously were the grace and power of God exhibited in him *!

To Eneas, a poor afflicted paralytic, he spake in the name of his divine Master; and health and vigour were instantly restored. The astonishing cure was rendered more remarkable by the effects which it produced: the inhabitants of the town, which was called Lydda, "turned to the Lord." He was sent for to Joppa, which lay in that neighbourhood, on occasion of the death of an eminently pious woman, Tabitha, or Dorcas; and at his word, after solemn prayer to God, she revived. This extraordinary miracle also tended to the enlargement of the church. Many were convinced, and received the Christian doctrine: Peter, therefore, continued with them for some time, that he might confirm them in the faith. How honourable and useful his employment! In some measure resembling his dear Lord, he "went about doing good," administering relief to the diseased in body, with a view to promote their spiritual and eternal welfare. O, may we live under the influence of this holy and benevolent principle! Though we possess not miraculous powers, yet something may be effected, in our respective places, for the honour of Christ, and the salvation of our fellow-creatures.

A. D. From Joppa St. Peter removed to Cesarea 41. upon a singular occurrence, which introduces a most important history. "The Gospel of the circumcision was committed to him †," but it pleased God to distinguish him, also, as the first instrument of carrying the glad tidings to the Gentiles. And now the grand dispensation, the mystery which had been kept secret for ages, began to be unfolded, "that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ ‡." The Apostles themselves were with difficulty per-

* Acts ix. 32, &c. † Gal. ii. 7. ‡ Eph. iii. 6.

suaded to believe it, though it had been so expressly predicted by the ancient prophets. A particular revelation prepared the mind of Peter for proposing these high privileges to the Heathens, and removed his objections.

When he had retired for prayer about the middle of the day, according to the practice of devout persons, the Lord taught him by a visible representation, three times repeated, that the distinction of clean and unclean, appointed by the ceremonial law, was about to cease, and that what God had sanctified he must not reject as common or polluted*. Just at that instant certain messengers from Cornelius, who had been sent by divine direction, inquired for the Apostle: and, that his Jewish prejudices might not prevent him, he received express instructions from the Spirit to go with them. If God evidently lead the way, we ought not to hesitate. Yet, alas! through perverseness, obstinacy, and many corrupt tempers, we are often unwilling to follow, even where the line of duty is accurately marked out. May the grace of our God render us obedient to his will, by whatever means it is made known!

Peter went to Cesarea, and there showed that he sought not his own glory, but that of his Master: sensible of what was due to him, and conscious of his own demerits, he declined the homage which Cornelius imprudently offered. Many of the centurion's friends were assembled to hear the doctrine of this extraordinary teacher. Accordingly, after stating on what grounds he had undertaken the journey, he proceeded to preach the Gospel to them without reserve. He declared his full conviction that a way of access to God was opened for men of every nation: he insisted on the character and work of Jesus, on his life, death, resurrection, and the future judgment: he maintained, that, agreeably to God's revelations by his prophets from the beginning, remission of sins could now be obtained by all who

* Acts x. 1, &c.

believe in the Saviour's name. It pleased God to confirm the word, and prove undeniably that he would have the Gentiles admitted into his church: for those purposes the Holy Ghost immediately descended upon all the company. After such an attestation of divine acceptance, the Apostle could not be unwilling to receive them as his Christian brethren. He commanded them, therefore, to be baptized, and, at their earnest request, for their further instruction and advancement, he continued with them some days.

We rejoice that the same blessed message of salvation is come even unto us, who were once in Pagan darkness, and that God still gives testimony to the preaching of his truth by the demonstration of his Spirit, though not in so extraordinary a manner. Pardon and peace are offered in the name of Jesus; and, by the faith of him, many among us, "who were some time alienated, are now reconciled" to God. We should be glad to observe that others, as well as ourselves, are recovered, from whatever state, and by whatever means, they may be called. Though they were once of a different religion, or of no religion at all, we should exult in their salvation, like the angels in heaven. If the Lord God has sealed them for his own by the Holy Ghost, who are we, that we should refuse them "the right hand of fellowship?"

The free communication of St. Peter with the Gentiles, as here related, gave offence to some of his Jewish brethren at Jerusalem*. But, upon his returning to that place, and explicitly declaring the matter, their vehement prejudices were in a great measure removed, and they adored the grace of God, which was imparted to the uncircumcised. Too frequently, alas! good men, through haste or bigotry, take umbrage at the conduct of others, whom they would cease to censure if they properly understood their situation, and the grounds on which they act.

* Acts xi. 1—18.

A. D. After some time a violent persecution arose
 44. against the church. Herod Agrippa, that proud
 and cruel tyrant, having put James to death, cast
 Peter into prison, and commanded him to be kept
 under a strong guard till he should be brought forth
 to public execution, for the entertainment of the
 people*. The Apostle, however, had numerous
 friends, who made continual intercession for him,
 not at the court of Herod, but before the throne of
 God; and their prayers procured his deliverance.
 Vain were all the precautions and means used for his
 confinement: the king's intention was frustrated,
 the expectation of the profane multitude disap-
 pointed. The very night preceding the day ap-
 pointed for Peter's suffering, while he slept with
 composure, not dreading the event, an Angel ap-
 peared to rescue him. Instantly his chains fell off,
 the iron gates gave way, and, under the conduct of
 his heavenly guide, he went out through the midst
 of sentinels without interruption.

Just at that time many pious persons were actually
 engaged in offering up their supplications for the
 Apostle, when they were assured by his arrival
 amongst them that they had obtained acceptance.
 After indulging his grateful and devout sensations
 with his friends and brethren, praising God for this
 extraordinary dispensation, he retired from them,
 seeking probably a more convenient retreat. His
 disappointed enemies were enraged at his escape
 and the guards, who had been set over him, put to
 death in his stead. "Great and marvellous are thy
 works, Lord God Almighty: just and true are thy
 ways, thou King of saints! Who shall not fear thee,
 O Lord, and glorify thy name †?" He is "wonder-
 ful in counsel, and excellent in working," who
 "pleadeth the cause of his people ‡." He may suf-
 fer them to be oppressed through tyrants, yet in
 many remarkable cases he has displayed his regard
 for them, and proved that "their Redeemer is

* Acts xii. 1—19. † Rev. xv. 3, 4. ‡ Isa. xxviii. 29. li. 22.
 strong."

strong *." The instance before us stands as a convincing token of his gracious attention to prayer. The importunate cries of the poor persecuted saints opened the prison-doors, and delivered an Apostle. O let us be encouraged, in every distress, to make known our requests unto God with greater frequency and fervour, and we shall surely prevail!

A. D. St. Peter is again introduced to our notice in ^{52.} the grand council of the church at Jerusalem. When the question was there agitated, whether obedience to the Mosaic law should be urged upon the believing Gentiles, he rose up and declared how God had commissioned him to preach the Gospel to the uncircumcised, had given them the Holy Spirit, and purified their hearts by faith †. He argued, therefore, that, being received to the divine favour without ceremonial observances, they should be left to their full liberty; and he maintained the important doctrine, that none can be saved any otherwise than through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Yet, on one occasion afterwards, he acted inconsistently with his professed principles. At Antioch he lived on terms of Christian fellowship with the converted Gentiles, but at length withdrew from their society, through the fear of displeasing certain Jewish zealots who came to that place ‡. This wavering conduct produced bad effects. Many, through the influence of his example, betrayed the same timidity; and, while he endeavoured to conciliate one side, he grieved and staggered another. St. Paul, therefore, sharply reprov'd him, representing that, from his behaviour, it might seem as if he did not consider the believing Gentiles in a state of acceptance, or had renounced the fundamental doctrine of justification by faith alone.

What shall we say to this instance of unsteadiness? We presume not to defend it, "because he was to be blamed." It does not appear that he offered any excuse for himself, and we should hope that he frankly

* Jer. i. 34.

† Acts xv. 6—11.

‡ Gal. ii. 11, &c.

confessed

confessed and immediately repented of his fault. The most eminent Apostles are not proposed as perfect patterns. They all discovered failings, and were liable to be again and again overcome by temptation even as we are. Let us beware for ourselves. Are there not those among us who are guilty of mere compliances, and who, not merely in one instance but habitually, counteract the dictates of conscience through fear of temporal inconveniencies? Do we not too much consult the world, how far they will allow us to associate with serious Christians? Let us abhor dissimulation, and act an open and upright part. Whatever we may suffer, let us determine to "walk according to the truth of the Gospel," and not hesitate to show our cordial attachment to the people of God.

Peter betrayed a wrong spirit, and Paul was a reprover; a circumstance which strongly confirms the doctrine which they preached. If there had been any collusion, any cheat practised upon mankind, it would certainly have been discovered when these two great champions differed. Yet even when they perfectly agreed in matters of opinion, and afterwards continued to maintain the same principles, and promote the same work, as "labourers together with God."

The life of St. Peter was protracted to a considerable length, and spent in active exertions for the honour of his Master. It should seem that his Master accompanied him in his travels, and that they subsisted upon the bounty of others*. Some precious remains of his writings are transmitted to us, and these he yet speaketh, and will speak to the end of time. His two epistles were addressed to the dispersed Christians, for the purpose of comforting them in their troubles, confirming them in the faith, warning them against seducers, enlivening their hope, and regulating their conduct. Let us study these inspired exhortations with serious attention, till the

* 1-Cor. ix. 5.

have produced their full influence upon our hearts. Surely we cannot refuse to listen to so venerable "an elder," who was "a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed*." Both these epistles were composed in his old age, and they seem to be marked with its character: in the second, especially, his language is that of one who considered his dissolution as at hand, and who was taking leave of the world. Here, then, he has delivered his most solemn thoughts, in the near view of eternity. And did he waver in his mind? Did he renounce his principles? No: far otherwise. He desired most earnestly that his instructions might be always remembered after his decease †: and having described, with an astonishing grandeur and majesty, the destruction of the earth, and the appearance of Christ as the universal Judge, he added, "What manner of persons ought ye to be, in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God ‡?"

A. D. At length he finished his course in an honour-
 about able manner: he died a martyr (it is thought
 67. when he was about seventy-five years old), and sealed with his blood the truth which he had preached. His Lord had foretold that he should be taken off by a violent death, even that of crucifixion §; and this came to pass under the tyranny of Nero. It is believed that both he and St. Paul suffered at Rome about the same time, and that St. Peter was crucified with his head downwards, at his own desire, as if he thought himself unworthy to resemble his Master. Be that as it may, he now appears in glory, where, amongst all "the noble army of martyrs ||," he will admire and praise his God and Saviour, and reign with Him for ever and ever.

Many Prophets, Apostles, and ministers, have lost their lives in vindication of the Gospel; but, while we lament the removal of such able advocates, we

* 1 Pet. v. i. † 2 Pet. 1. 15. ‡ iii. 11, 12.

§ John xxi. 18, 19.

¶ Te Deum.

rejoice that God will plead his own cause, and make the word of his grace to prosper from age to age. We would inquire of every reader, and entreat him earnestly to put the question to himself, Is not this system of faith, for which St. Peter died, worthy of attention? Or, "how shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?" Desire, then, to know and feel the excellency of those principles, for the defence of which so much has been done and suffered: according to the exhortation of this inspired writer, "giving diligence to make your calling and election sure *."

* 2 Pet. i. 10.

SAINT JOHN

THE APOSTLE AND EVANGELIST.

CHAP. VI.

John, his parentage and occupation—called by Christ—appointed an Apostle—was present at the transfiguration—forbad one casting out devils—proposed to consume the Samaritans—petitioned for the highest place—attended his Lord at the last passover in Gethsemane, and at the cross—was the first who believed the resurrection—laboured with Peter at Jerusalem, and in Samaria—banished to Patmos—preached and died at Ephesus—his Gospel, Epistles, and Revelations.

ALL the Apostles of Jesus, excepting the traitor, possessed a real excellence of character, yet in some of them we may trace a difference. They believed and felt the same principles, and were endowed with equal integrity, whilst the natural temper of each gave a bias to his conduct and a trait to his manners, which distinguished him from the rest of his brethren, and which enhanced or diminished the value of his friendship. God gives his grace to men whose inclinations and habits are unlike, and they are blessed with the same salvation; yet, as the ordinary varieties of the human mould still remain in them, their virtue is more or less engaging and attractive. The eleven were all, but not equally, dear to their Master: some obtained marks of his peculiar esteem. We presume not to censure his conduct, or to demand the reasons on which he acts. If Christ, who took our nature, yielded not to those sensations which incline us to prefer one companion to another, yet he

is the sovereign Lord, and has a right to bestow his favours when and as he pleases. Three of those whom he had chosen out of the world were honoured above the rest by his attention : and, of these three, one was admitted to a nearer intimacy, and a large share of his regard. This was he whose history is now introduced to our notice, and who is so frequently described by that expression, "the disciple whom Jesus loved." St. John, it is allowed, possessed an uncommon sweetness of temper; and perhaps, as we have hinted, that strong affection and close union which subsisted between him and his Lord may be ascribed to their reciprocal feelings, occasioned by the similarity of their dispositions. Certain it is that, in proportion as we cultivate the spirit of love, we shall enjoy a familiarity of intercourse with Christ. An imitation of this favoured Apostle will likewise bring credit to our profession of the Gospel, and add much to the peace and happiness of our own souls.

The followers of Jesus were chiefly such as obtained not any high distinction among men. He makes no account of the embellishments which catch the notice and admiration of the world: he passes by many of elevated rank, and "exalteth them of low degree." The parentage of John was mean; his situation in life obscure. His brother James and he were sons of Zebedee, a fisherman at Bethsaida, in Galilee, and brought up to the same occupation. These two were partners with Peter and Andrew in the concerns of their trade, and commenced their attendance upon the Saviour at the same time*. Being struck with amazement at the miraculous draught of fishes which had been taken under the direction of Jesus, they were instantly disposed to obey his call. At his word they forsook their father, their vessels, and employment; and, becoming his stated followers, were prepared for the apostleship, to which they were soon afterwards appointed. The

* Matt. iv. 21, 22. Luke v. 10, 11.

summons pronounced by Christ, being accompanied by the influence of his Spirit, prevented or removed from their minds every objection. Thus, also, in general, the people who enter upon his service are "willing in the day of his power*" to undergo every difficulty for his sake. Let us pray, with our church, that, after this example, we may forsake all worldly and carnal affections, and be evermore ready to follow God's holy commandments through Jesus Christ our Lord †.

The two brothers probably resembled each other in disposition, and are so frequently mentioned together, that we shall find many of the same things related of them both. When ordained to the Apostleship, they were called by one name, "Boanerges," or "The sons of thunder ‡." The appellation, we presume, does not imply that the manner of their address was terrific, which would be inconsistent with the gentle and loving spirit of St. John; but it denotes rather the fervour of their zeal, and the efficacy of their preaching, which, like thunder, shook many hearts, and overcame the strongest opposition. O for men of this description, to stand forth as advocates for Christ in the present age!

John is supposed to have been the youngest of the Apostles, and appointed to the sacred function when he was not more than twenty-six years old. It is truly desirable to give up the heart to God, and begin his work, in early life, that our best days, and the vigour both of body and mind, may be devoted to his service. How much mischief might thus be prevented! what extensive usefulness promoted!

St. John was one of the three honoured companions of Christ who were admitted to behold him in his glory on the mount of transfiguration §. Probably from that heavenly vision he was led with greater earnestness to contemplate and admire his divine Master, of whose dignity he had received such a

* Psal. cx. 3.

† Collect for St. James the Apostle.

‡ Mark iii. 17.

§ Matt. xvii. 1.

transcendent proof. He recommended him, therefore, to the regard of others, from a clear knowledge of his person, and an attentive consideration of his excellency. Thus he writes, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the word of life declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us*."

Yet even in John, who enjoyed the most intimate communications with the Saviour, we perceive the depravity of human nature. He felt the conflict arising from "the flesh lusting against the spirit," and discovered some failings that we should not have expected in an Apostle, and especially in one so much distinguished for his meekness and love. What other conclusion can we draw than this, "Let no man glory in men †?"

On a certain occasion, whilst Jesus inculcated humility, John seemed to be convinced of acting unsuitably to his temper; at least, he desired to know whether his conduct had been consistent. He observed that he and some other of the disciples had seen a person casting out devils in the name of Christ, and forbidden him to prosecute that service, merely because he belonged not to their company ‡. This evidently betrayed a narrowness and bigotry of mind, and, as it deserved, met with a reproof. The admonition which was now delivered teaches us that those who profess a real regard to, and dependence on, the Saviour, and who promote his cause, ought not to be rashly censured or discouraged, though they associate not with us, and though in some respects they differ from our sentiments. Alas! there are few who possess that extensive liberality which our religion calls for. Are we not all prone to condemn such as accord not exactly with our system, and comply not with our forms, even where we are forced to acknowledge that they obey the same Mas-

* 1 John i. 1—3.

† 1 Cor. iii. 21.

‡ Mark ix. 38—40. Luke ix. 49, 50.

ter, and exert themselves for the subversion of Satan's kingdom?

Upon our Lord's journey to Jerusalem, certain Samaritans refused to entertain him, through their hatred of the Jewish nation*. John and his brother considered this insolent treatment as deserving of the severest punishment, and proposed, after the example of Elijah, to call down upon the offenders fire from heaven. Doubtless they acted under the habitual influence of love to Christ, and zeal for his name; yet at that time they were instigated by resentment, and a warmth of passion which cannot be justified. Jesus, therefore, sharply rebuked their rashness and impetuosity, as inconsistent with the nature of his religion and the benevolent object of his mission. "The Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." And shall his followers be furious and vindictive, or pursue their adversaries with bitter execrations? Will any insults or injuries vindicate such a temper? Will you plead, under a vehemence of this sort, that you are actuated by a pure regard to God and his truth? Alas! you deceive yourselves: "ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of." Far different are the weapons which you should use in contending against infidels and heretics. "The wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God †." O, study the genius of the Gospel, and the tendency of its principles! Is not its main design to promote peace and salvation? And has not the great Founder of your faith exhibited an astonishing example of forgiveness and kindness to enemies? How, then, does it appear that you have learned Christ, while you burn with resentment and indignation?

The warmth of our Apostle upon this occasion must be ascribed, in part at least, to his prejudice against the Samaritans, whom he had been taught to hate from his youth. He had often seen his Master insulted, and treated with greater contumely, by the

* Luke ix. 51—56.

† James i. 20.

Scribes and Pharisees; and yet he had never expressed a wish to call down fire upon them. So great is the force of education! Still, it must be allowed, the furious proposal coming from one of so sweet a disposition as St. John is perfectly unaccountable, except we acknowledge the corrupt state of human nature, even in the regenerate. Thus, also, it appears, that many of the saints of God, in certain circumstances of temptation, have acted in direct opposition to those habits and tempers for which they are most distinguished. When we read of intemperance in Noah, anger in Moses, impatience in Job, cowardice in Peter, shall we wonder that some sparks of resentment remained even in John? Let us beware for ourselves, and consider by what principles we are influenced: "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool*."

We are obliged to take notice of another instance in which the lustre of this eminent character was obscured. When our Lord was travelling to Jerusalem for the last time, and had just foretold his approaching passion, the Apostles James and John preferred a petition, through the mediation of their mother, that they might be appointed to the highest posts in his kingdom †. The request arose from their carnal notions of the Messiah's erecting a temporal dominion, and evidently savoured of an ambitious spirit. It was particularly strange and preposterous that they should lay their schemes for worldly advancement, when informed that their Master was about to suffer the utmost extremity. A reproof was necessary; and accordingly the Saviour reprehended them, though with peculiar mildness. "Ye know not," said he, "what ye ask." Ah! how often do we come under this condemnation! Through the prevalence of wrong affections "we ask amiss;" and God in great mercy refuses to grant our supplications.

Jesus inquired of them, "Are ye able to drink of

* Prov. xxviii. 26.

† Matt. xx. 17—23. Mark x. 32—40. Luke xviii. 31—34.

the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" Or, in other words, "Can you take part with me in those tremendous afflictions which I am going to endure?" They did not wish to decline the most painful service; but it was probably ignorance and self-confidence which dictated the reply, "We are able." He warned them to expect the severe conflict, and observed, that the disposal of future honours must be left to the sovereign pleasure of God. Agreeably to this prediction, they were honoured with a share in their Master's sufferings: John with bonds, stripes, imprisonment, and exile; and James with a speedy martyrdom.

Christians, you perceive, from this example, that though in the sincerity of your hearts you have relinquished all for the Gospel's sake, you may still be tempted to entertain improper thoughts and desires through covetousness or ambition. Can you so boast of your own strength as to suppose yourselves incapable of being actuated by any carnal motives? Rather, do you not feel such corrupt affections as cover you with confusion, and almost overwhelm you with distress? This part of our history may afford you some relief. We do not vindicate what is in any measure opposite to a holy spiritual frame of mind. But it may still encourage your hope to observe, that those who were dear to God, and eminent in his service, sometimes betrayed strange inconsistencies. Let the subject, however, produce real humiliation, and excite you to constant circumspection. Being apprized of your danger, you should implore assistance.

There are those who seem to exult in the failings of good men, as if they proved the whole system of religion to be a cheat and delusion. But how unfair, as well as impious, is such a conduct! We allow that even the Apostles felt some degree of prejudice, ambition, and resentment: but does this concession detract from the general excellence of their character? On the contrary, does not true candour require

us to say that they have evinced their integrity by declaring their own defects?

Will you maintain, that, because the saints of God are not perfect, you, who resolutely persevere in the practice of sin, are as safe as they? Is there not an essential difference? Their habitual aim and delight is to do the will of God; yours to gratify your corrupt nature, in opposition to Him. They are humbled and grieved for their failures in duty; you justify a continual system of transgression, and imitate them only in those things which they deeply lament, and consider as a disgrace to their profession. How totally dissimilar! The comparison cannot flatter your pride: it shows the odiousness of your prevailing temper, and the danger to which your souls are exposed.

Jesus reproved the improper desires of his beloved disciple, but did not withdraw his kindness. John still remained his constant attendant, and most intimate friend. He was sent in company with Peter to prepare the passover*: and, during the last solemn celebration of that festival, it is remarked that John leaned on the bosom of his dear Lord; that is, according to their posture at table, he sat the nearest†. In that place, which was granted him as a token of peculiar affection, he could propose questions, unperceived by the rest; and accordingly, having asked who was the traitor, he first received the intimation that Judas was the man.

St. John was admitted into the garden of Gethsemane at the time when the Saviour, retiring for secret prayer, endured his tremendous agony‡. There also, like Peter and James, this favoured Apostle betrayed a very sinful remissness, and spent in sleep the precious moments which ought to have been improved in holy watchfulness and fervent devotion. It is acknowledged, too, that, when his Lord was apprehended, he, as well as the other disciples, forsook him and fled, in violation of the most solemn pro-

* Luke xxii. 8. † John xiii. 23—26. ‡ Matt. xxvi. 36—46.

mises *. Yet, being soon recovered from his fears, he followed him to the place of trial, and stood there a silent witness of the contempt and cruelty with which he was treated.

When Jesus was nailed to the cross, exposed to all the insults and outrage of the people, John had the fortitude to continue by him, even to the last, and, probably, was the only Apostle who did so †. His constancy and fidelity were well compensated. His dying Master looked on him, and gave him a signal token of regard. He requested his dear mother to consider this beloved disciple as her own son, and commended her also, in her disconsolate state, to the care of John. There is, at all times, a claim in wretchedness to protection and relief. But the present was a peculiar affliction, exciting peculiar sympathies. The parent of the holy Sufferer, in those moments when every bequest is sacred, was committed to the Apostle, as a mother claiming his support. He acknowledged the obligation and the trust, received her to his house, and treated her with all filial tenderness and respect. Shall not we, likewise, learn to maintain a firm attachment to the Saviour, be mindful of his solemn injunctions, and esteem ourselves honoured in fulfilling them? Though we can show no personal kindness to him or his parent, yet he has constituted the poor as his representatives, and intrusted them to us. Let none of his people refuse or neglect the charge.

When Christ was risen from the dead, our Apostle, accompanied by Peter, ran with eager haste to examine the sepulchre, upon the report of Mary Magdalene. It should seem that from his view of the place, and of the orderly disposition of the burial-clothes, he was the first who believed the important fact of the resurrection ‡. On the evening of the same day he was one of the assembly to whom Jesus appeared; but probably he was not favoured with

* Matt. xxvi. 56.

† John xix. 26, 27.

‡ John xx. 1—10. See West on the Resurrection.

any separate vision of him; nor could that be needful, if, as we suppose, his faith was sufficiently confirmed. When fishing with certain disciples, on the sea of Tiberias, he first recollected the person of his Lord, who called to them from the shore*. A remarkable interview ensued, at the close of which we are struck with one circumstance, which evinced his humility, love, and zeal. When Peter received an injunction to attend the Saviour, John waited not for any such express direction, but instantly rose up, as if eager to show his attachment, and with silent meekness followed †. Let us examine whether we possess a readiness of this kind, to go after Christ wherever he shall lead the way. When he is pleased to intimate his will, are there no hesitations, no delays or misgivings? Our conduct, more than our professions, should declare our desire to enter on his service.

The curiosity of Peter, respecting John's future destination, was immediately checked by that singular reply; "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?" It was concluded, from this expression, that the Apostle should not die: but the opinion arose from a mistaken interpretation. It seemed, however, to be implied, that he was designed to be spared in the church till the coming of Christ for the destruction of Jerusalem. The event, at least, was such: he was one of those who did not taste of death till the kingdom of God, in that awful dispensation, was accomplished ‡. Whatever changes may await us, let us leave ourselves and all our concerns to our Lord's disposal. Only let us follow him without reserve, as did this man of God, and endeavour to employ our time usefully and honourably, whether a longer or a shorter space may yet remain.

After the ascension of Christ, St. John appeared more conspicuous, and probably shone with greater splendour than before. He is described as continuing

* John xxi. 1, &c.

† See Doddr. Expos. Vol. ii. Sect. 201.

‡ Matt. xvi. 28.

in holy fellowship with his brethren, resolutely adhering to the cause of his Master amidst formidable dangers, boldly and vigorously pursuing the grand objects of his sacred function. On the day of Pentecost, he, together with the other Apostles, received the miraculous effusion of the Spirit, and was employed in gathering in the remarkable harvest, when three thousand souls were converted. He is exhibited to our notice as the companion of St. Peter in many of his labours and persecutions. They two were going up to worship at the temple, when the lame man attracted their benevolent regard, and experienced their power of healing*. They were preaching to the people, when the priests and rulers apprehended them, and cast them into prison†. With undaunted courage they stood together before the council, despised their threatenings, and expressed a firm determination "to obey God rather than men." Again they were thrust into a dungeon, and rescued by an Angel‡. Being scourged and menaced, they rejoiced in the honour to which they were called, "and daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ."

St. John, likewise, was commissioned, as the associate of Peter, to go down from Jerusalem to confirm the young converts in Samaria§. There they imparted spiritual gifts, and declared the tidings of peace and salvation, through the Redeemer's name, in many towns and villages. The chief residence of our Apostle was at Jerusalem, where St. Paul distinguished him as one of the main pillars of the church||. But after some time he removed to Ephesus, and thence took his circuits for the promulgation of the Gospel in Asia, "labouring in word and doctrine," and establishing many Christian societies¶. At length, when the Roman emperor Domitian raised a violent persecution, it is said that John was sent to Rome, that he might be put to death, and,

* Acts iii. 1, &c. † iv. 1, &c. ‡ v. 17, &c. § viii. 14—25.

|| Gal. ii. 9.

¶ See Cave's Lives of the Apostles.

being

being plunged into a caldron of boiling oil, came out unhurt. Whether or no that tradition be well founded, he was banished to Patmos, a small island in the Egean sea, condemned, as he himself affirms, "for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ*." In that dreary situation he continued for nearly two years, and then, upon Domitian's decease, returned to his charge at Ephesus, where he long remained a blessing to the church, a faithful witness and strenuous advocate for the truth of the Gospel.

It is recorded, that, at a very advanced age, being unable to walk or preach, he was constantly carried to the public assemblies, and there exhorted the people by that short sentence, so expressive of his general spirit, "My little children, let us love one another." At last, though in his life he had suffered severer agonies than the pains of martyrdom, he died in peace, having been wonderfully preserved from violence, for the benefit of others, till he had attained almost a hundred years.

Let us admire and praise the grace of God, exhibited in this eminent Apostle, and consider our obligations to imitate his example. There are those, perhaps, who plead that they are not called to the same high function. But do you, therefore, justify your carnal affections and pursuits? Or do you think it allowable, in a private situation, to be proud, selfish, indolent, and revengeful? If you profess Christianity, you ought to be followers of St. John, so far as to manifest similar dispositions. In your place, and according to your measure, you should be kind and gentle, bold and active, faithful and persevering in the service of Christ. But if the corrupt desires of the flesh predominate in your minds, if you love the world and the things of the world, if you are ashamed of, or averse to, the exercises of devotion, your pretences to religion are vain.

Our Apostle lived to see the Gospel propagated to

* Rev. i. 9.

a large extent, yea, through the greater part of the known world. But he beheld, also, the corruption, as well as the increase, of the Christian church. Many pernicious errors were, even in that early age, broached and disseminated, relating to the person of the Redeemer: among other false doctrines, that was the chief which denied his divinity. An opinion so dangerous could not but excite the notice and grief of this venerable preacher of the faith: and accordingly, in the ardour of his love to God and men, he set himself to oppose it with firmness. "This," said he, "is that spirit of antichrist, whereof you have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world*." Ought we not to lament that ancient heresies are revived in the present day, and threaten to deluge our land? Or shall we be indifferent about the consequence? Is it of no importance in what light the Saviour is regarded,—whether he be worshipped and adored as God over all, or degraded into a mere man like ourselves? Where is our fidelity? where our zeal for the truth?

We bless God for the writings of the Apostle, which will enable us to resist and confute the erroneous and destructive representations of perverse and ungodly men. He was honoured in being employed as one of the sacred authors of the New Testament: and, while we confess that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God," and claim our regard, we perceive a peculiar sweetness, spirituality, and sublimity, in St. John's compositions. Probably for the clear and comprehensive revelations with which he was favoured, the profound mysteries which he has delivered, and the heavenly manner in which he has treated them, he has been called the Divine.

His Gospel was published after all the others, not

* 1 John iv. 3. See Dr. Horsley's Charge and Letters, in which it is proved that St. John's assertions were expressly levelled against those who denied the deity of Christ as well as against them who allowed not his humanity.

only for the purpose of recording many things which they had omitted, but with an especial view to oppose the heresies of the Gnostics, and to assert the Godhead of Christ. He introduces the history with an elevated preface, in which he has explicitly declared the excellency and deity of his Master; and he relates many of those wonderful discourses, which prove and display the supreme perfections of Jesus. He bears a decided testimony, even towards the close of life, not only that the Word, which was made flesh, originally was with God, and was God, but also that he himself "beheld his glory," and "received of his fulness*." Let us pray for more enlarged conceptions of "the great mystery of godliness;" and, as we advance in the knowledge and love of Christ, these authentic memorials will become more and more precious in our estimation.

The epistles of St. John discover the distinguishing part of his character. Every reader must acknowledge that the inspired author breathed nothing but love. And is not this allowed to be the peculiar badge of our profession? Yet, alas! we lament that contrary dispositions prevail in the Christian world. What confusion is produced among us by envy, strife, and revenge! We would, therefore, enforce the exhortations of the Apostle: "Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God: He that loveth not, knoweth not God; for God is love †." According to this decision, but few have attained the right knowledge of the Gospel; and those who have made the greatest progress have yet much more to learn.

The sublime and mysterious book of the Revelations was written by St. John during his banishment in the isle of Patmos. The Lord God vouchsafed to favour him with singular visions and discoveries, and to place him, as it were, on the verge of heaven, when excluded from human society. The counsels

* John i. 1—16.

† 1 John iv. 7, 8.

of Jehovah, respecting future ages, were declared to him; and these he has faithfully recorded. Here, then, is exhibited a series of prophecy, which unfolds the grand schemes of Providence, even to the end of the world. May we read and contemplate with holy reverence and admiration!

The glories of the celestial state were, in some measure, disclosed to the Apostle's view. He saw the throne of God, and heard the high praises of the Redeemer, which are continually chanted by innumerable myriads of saints and angels. No other part of the Bible contains such exalted descriptions of God and his kingdom as this inspired book. Do they not excite wonder, love, and joy? Should we not exult in the prospect of that felicity which is here brought before us? Or can we be content with that poor sordid satisfaction which the earth affords? Rather, are we not wearied and disgusted with its best possessions? And do we not long to join "the glorious company of the Apostles," who are now admitted into the beatific presence of God? We dare not say who out of this number is accounted first in dignity: but we presume that he, who, by way of eminence, was styled "the Disciple whom Jesus loved," is placed near to his adorable Lord.

However bright were the views of St. John in this life, yet they were comparatively faint and obscure. He saw "through a glass darkly;" but now he sees "face to face*." Now he is favoured with clearer and larger discoveries of the glory of God and the mystery of redemption: and now he better understands the excellency of "the holy Jerusalem," in which is "the throne of God and of the Lamb †." That exalted state is prepared, not for the Apostles only, but, as we trust, for many among ourselves. Do you aspire to that high honour? You must possess a meetness for it: you must have the seal of God in your foreheads; you must wash your robes, and make them white in the blood of the Lamb ‡.

* 1 Cor. xiii. 12. † Rev. xxii. 3. ‡ vii. 3, 14.

Like St. John, cultivate an intercourse with Jesus, and apply for fresh communications out "of his fulness," even "grace for grace*." Be willing to labour and to suffer for him till you finish your course on earth, and then you shall shortly join with Prophets and Apostles in that elevated song, "Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever †." Amen.

* John i. 16.

† Rev. v. 13.

HEROD ANTIPAS.

CHAP. VII.

Herod Antipas, his rank and character—his incestuous marriage—imprisoned John Baptist—yet revered him—heard him gladly—and made a partial reformation—was restrained from destroying him, through fear of the people—at length beheaded him—was afraid of his being raised from the dead—threatened Jesus—examined and insulted him—died in exile.

HUMAN nature will be found the same under all the variety of circumstances in which it can be placed. If, therefore, we compare past and present times, or take a view of different situations in life, we may expect that similar characters will occur to our observation. But, while we remark in what respects others have failed, or by what temptations they have been overcome, may we be warned from their examples, and avoid those snares which have already proved so fatal!

One of exalted rank is now introduced to our notice; yet, possibly, a near resemblance of him may be traced in persons of a lower condition. It is Herod, surnamed Antipas, of whom certain particulars are related by the Evangelists. He was the son of that Herod, called the Great, who sought the destruction of the infant Saviour, and massacred the children at Beth-lehem. This man possessed only a part of his father's dominions, over which he presided merely as the vicegerent of the Roman emperor, with the title of Tetrarch or King of Galilee. Historians are agreed that he was a prince of licentious and abandoned conduct, of which, indeed, sufficient proofs are given. We shall confine ourselves to those circumstances which the Scriptures have recorded:

and,

and, agreeably to this short account, he will appear to have opposed the most solemn warnings and strong convictions, and sacrificed every principle to the gratification of his lust. May we be aware of our own danger, and learn to restrain those sensual desires "which war against the soul!"

Herod had divorced his own wife, and joined himself to another by an adulterous and incestuous connexion: he had married the wife of his brother Philip, after having basely seduced her from her husband. This led to various enormities, and produced complicated troubles. John the Baptist, being sent for to Herod's court, probably from motives of curiosity, perceived, and dared not to connive at, the sinful practices of the king. The preacher sought not his favour, and feared not his displeasure. As a bold advocate for God, not "having respect to persons," he brought a heavy charge of guilt against the royal hearer, and reprehended him, with fidelity and plainness, "for all the evils which he had done*." This was not a general invective against his immoralities; a particular application was made to his conscience for the continued commission of adultery and incest. John declared his connexion with Herodias to be highly criminal, and called upon him to put away the woman, with whom the law both of God and man forbade him to cohabit.

This honest address produced not the desired effect. Alas! reproofs are seldom well received. Most persons rise with anger against him who is so much their friend as to tell them of their faults. What, then, could be expected from an imperious and licentious prince? There are few who dare to rebuke sin in a palace: it is the unhappy prerogative of dignity to be considered as above control. Those who possess an exalted station, are apt to spurn with indignation at any restraint which an inferior, and especially a preacher, may attempt to impose. But resentment, on such occasions, is not confined to

* Matt. xiv. 3—5. Mark vi. 17—20. Luke iii. 19, 20.

kings; we perceive that many in lower life are incapable of bearing any sharp reprehension. Have we not been displeased with the faithful admonitions of a companion or minister? Have we not desired to hear no more of such unpleasant subjects, and, instead of profiting by the serious counsel, meditated revenge against its author? But surely we are our own enemies when we quarrel with those who from pure benevolence point out to us "all the evils which we have done," and charge us to relinquish what we cannot lawfully retain.

Herod was enraged, and his officers were immediately commissioned to bind and imprison the Baptist. It is remarked that he "added yet this above all," as if it were the greatest of all his enormities, "that he shut up John in prison." The persecution of God's servants, for the upright and zealous performance of their duty, is an offence peculiarly heinous; and He, whose cause they plead, will avenge the injury. The opposition, as in the case before us, generally arises from the uneasiness which sinners feel upon a bold and unreserved representation of their guilt and danger. O that their anger were turned against themselves, and not against their reprover; that they would endeavour not to silence him, but to reform their own evil conduct! If Herod had understood his true happiness or interest, he would have embraced John as his best friend; and the ministry of that good man might have been continued for a much longer period.

Yet there were some favourable appearances in Herod; and it may seem a matter of wonder that the strong convictions which he felt were so transient or inefficacious. His adulterous queen was more incensed than he, and, from the first, wished to destroy the Baptist. Probably she apprehended, that, through the preacher's admonitions, she should lose her influence, and be dismissed with disgrace. She, therefore, urged the king not merely to imprison but to kill him, that they might no longer be troubled with

with his insolence. To this proposal, however Herod would not yield an immediate compliance he was restrained by a powerful impression upon his mind. "He feared John, knowing that he was just man, and an holy." This circumstance demands our attention. The Lord God put an honour upon his faithful servant, and made him respectable in chains, even before the most enraged enemies. Such a power very frequently accompanies eminent examples of godliness. It keeps in awe, and often terrifies, the persons who are disposed to persecute. Herod was struck with reverence for the man whom he had cast into a dungeon, and, under the view of John's singular holiness, probably perceived his own baseness, so as to be distressed with painful apprehensions.

The prisoner, it should seem, was not afraid of the king. What have those to dread who have the Lord Jehovah on their side? They possess a never-failing source of confidence and joy, and may therefore exult in defiance of their most violent opposers, though racks and tortures be prepared for their destruction. Be of good courage, you who follow the Lamb, and be "not terrified by your adversaries," whatever strength or authority they may boast of. They themselves, perhaps, may be inwardly dismayed, at the very time when they appear most formidable. That furious prince and persecutor, "Saul, was afraid of David, because the Lord was with him*." Only let your enemies perceive in you a consistent and exemplary conduct, and then, however they may affect to reproach, they cannot really despise you. We may appeal to them if there is not one or another whom they dislike for his religion, and yet cannot look at without a secret awe and terror on their minds, "knowing him to be a just man, and an holy." At some times it appears, that, under this impression, they would relinquish every worldly enjoyment, if they might exchange

* 1 Sam. xviii. 12.

conditions. O that they would yield to their own convictions, drop their opposition against those whom in their consciences they believe to be the objects of divine regard, and cordially join with them in zealous exertions for the cause of God and his truth!

Herod was not merely restrained from violence by a reverence for the Baptist; it should seem that he listened to his instructions, even after his imprisonment. Probably he sent for him, as Felix did for Paul*, "and communed with him." We conclude, also, that he paid attention to his doctrine; for it is expressly said that he "observed him," and, what is still more remarkable, that he "heard him gladly." On certain occasions, at least, his affections were much moved: he could not but commend and admire the honesty of the preacher, and perhaps would have shown no resentment if one particular subject had been avoided.

Some may inquire, How can persons of such a character as Herod receive any pleasure from the plain and faithful declarations of God's word? Possibly the speaker may be approved; his abilities, address, or elocution, may excite notice and applause, even where the principles he maintains, and the practical exhortations he delivers, are not regarded. The novelty, importance, and sublimity of the things chiefly insisted on, may seem for a time to entertain and interest the hearers, who may, therefore, be induced to take great pains in frequenting the divine ordinances. This may be the case where no spiritual affections are exercised, where the grand peculiarities of the Gospel are not understood, and no effectual application made to the conscience. O, beware of resting in such a superficial attendance! Think it not enough to distinguish truth from error, or to discover a fervour of zeal for right doctrines; be not satisfied in feeling admiration and delight while the awful mysteries of redemption are exhibited, and "good tidings of great joy" are announced. If you

* Acts xxiv. 26.

experience no godly sorrow for sin, no warm attachment to the Saviour, no renovation of heart by the Spirit, the sermons which you hear may afford you entertainment, but will not promote your salvation.

This is indeed a tremendous case; and yet it has frequently occurred. Of such auditors the Lord God thus warned the Prophet Ezekiel: "Lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument: for they hear thy words, but they do them not*." Many of like description attended on the Saviour. Multitudes of men and women expressed such delight in listening to his doctrine, that they travelled after him with much weariness and expense: yet many of them entirely forsook him; and some, who had, probably, sung Hosanna to his name, soon afterwards cried out, with extreme malignity, "Crucify him, crucify him." John the Baptist had other bearers of this sort besides Herod, who, as our Lord testified, "were willing for a season to rejoice in his light †." At first they were so struck with his solemn declarations of the Messiah's approach as to be transported with wonder and joy. But, when he boldly reproved their iniquitous conduct, and called them to the practice of mortification, they basely calumniated his ministry, and exclaimed, "He hath a devil ‡."

Herod, however, advanced further than merely expressing an admiration of the preacher; he was roused to action, and attempted a reformation. Convinced of the necessity of a change, "he did many things," relinquished many of his evil habits, and applied himself to the performance of various duties. This appeared promising indeed. But Herodias was still retained: he would not renounce his connexion with that infamous woman; and thus he betrayed the unsoundness of his heart. The real convert rests not in a partial amendment of life; he will abhor and forsake one sin as well as another, and yield a sin-

* Ezek. xxxiii. 32.

† John v. 35.

‡ Luke vii. 33.

cere

ere and uniform regard to every known precept. If, then, under the awakening influence of the word of God, you profess to be penitents, examine faithfully whether you are "new creatures." Has an universal renovation been produced? Are you determined, by divine grace, to put away all ungodliness? Have you made no reserve? Do you plead for no exception? Is there not a "sin which easily besets you," and to which, from your constitution or situation, you are most exposed? Is this what you are unwilling to abandon? This is, more than any other, the Herodias which must be divorced: for, if the favourite passion still retain its ascendancy, where is your deliverance from the love and power of iniquity?

Perhaps there is no carnal affection more insnaring, or more generally fatal, than lust. To what horrible ravages has it given rise! Many have been gradually allured by it from one transgression to another, till they have been led into such enormities of conduct as they once thought themselves incapable of committing. What will not men sacrifice to the gratification of their libidinous desires? They will disregard their interest, health, and reputation, violate the strongest ties and engagements, despise every admonition, oppose their own convictions, and, even while they feel the worth of their immortal souls, obstinately plunge into final perdition. What a grievous infatuation is this! Herod is but one, out of thousands, who will have to lament for ever a fond attachment to a shameless woman. How just is that description of the adulteress: "She hath cast down many wounded; yea, many strong men have been slain by her. Her house is the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death*!"

Let us mark the event with the king of Galilee. Highly as he revered the Baptist, he was at length persuaded to consent to his death, probably through the importunate entreaties of Herodias. Yet, for a

* Prov. vii. 26, 27.

time,

time, he was prevented from proceeding to any act of violence. "He feared the people," who universally regarded John as a prophet, and might have raised a general sedition, to avenge his murder. What! did he not fear to wound his own conscience, to shed innocent blood, provoke the fierce anger of the Lord, and destroy his precious soul? No: but he dreaded the resentment of a mob. A poor motive, indeed! Yet it is well for society that sinners are, in any way, restrained from effecting their purposes. Frequently, when good principles fail, some mercenary worldly considerations have a strong influence. Thus one evil passion keeps down another; and no persons, perhaps, feel themselves at liberty to do all that is in their hearts. Were it otherwise, the utmost confusion would prevail; and, such is our hatred of true religion, the church itself would be soon extirpated. How wonderful is the government which is maintained over the human race!

After some time, however, an occasion offered for the accomplishment of Herodias's wish. In an hour of temptation she carried her point: the compliant king was induced to give up his objections. At a splendid banquet, prepared for the celebration of his birth-day, when the daughter of his queen had danced before him and his nobles with great applause, he declared with an oath that he would grant her some mark of his favour, whatever she would ask, though it were the half of his dominion*. This was an instance of extreme rashness, and produced the most terrible effects. Alas! what can we expect from entertainments which are calculated to inflame and gratify the passions? The young woman was persuaded by her mother to claim the head of John the Baptist, who had excited her resentment. How strange the proposal! But a vindictive mind will give up every consideration for the sake of wreaking its vengeance on an enemy.

Herod himself appeared to be struck with horror

* Matt. xiv. 6—11. Mark vi. 21—29.

at

at the thought of perpetrating the atrocious deed, and yet had not firmness enough to resist. However his conscience might remonstrate, he determined not to exasperate Herodias by a refusal, and argued absurdly, that, unless he complied, he would be despised by his nobility for weakness and inconsistency. He consented, therefore, to the request, though with visible reluctance, and instantly commanded the head of the Lord's prophet to be severed from the body, and introduced into the company, as an object, probably, of their profane sport and contemptuous ridicule. Yet, if we make a right estimate of things, we shall be disposed to envy the condition of the Baptist, expiring by the hand of violence, rather than that of Herod, exalted upon a throne of iniquity.

It should seem the king pretended a regard to veracity in this base transaction: he was unwilling to violate his oath. What vile dissimulation was this! To avoid the charge of perjury, he committed a murder of peculiar enormity. No declarations, however confirmed by an oath, could have bound him to act in direct opposition to the clearest commands of God. It was his indispensable duty to depart from the promise, and repent of the rashness from which it proceeded. Probably the pretext was false. He perpetrated the crime, not to satisfy his conscience, but to preserve his credit among the courtiers, to silence the importunate clamours of his queen, and perhaps with a view of procuring ease to himself, by removing so troublesome a reprover.

Here we remark the ruinous tendency and progress of sin. The gratification of lust issued in murder; and, we fear, it is no uncommon event. When men abandon themselves to the indulgence of their sensual desires, no bounds will be sufficient to restrain them. They may be hurried from one base action to another, and be determined to persevere even while they themselves recoil at every step they take. Let us beware of yielding to those solicitations, which

will be encouraged by our compliance to increase their demands upon us, and may produce the most tremendous consequences. We may be exasperated by the rebukes of a faithful monitor, and induced to adopt some violent measures against him. But, though we should succeed in that point, still we may not be able to sin without restraint: we may carry about with us an inward tormentor, and, like Pashur, become a terror to ourselves*.

Herod was freed from John's reproofs, and persisted in his iniquity; but he could not forget that innocent blood had been shed, and under that conviction was rendered miserable. Some time afterward, having heard remarkable accounts of Jesus, he was filled with perplexing fears lest this should be the very person now restored to life whom he had beheaded. Did the oppressor expect the retaliation of his cruelty; the murderer, the approach of an avenger? It should seem the remembrance of the Baptist haunted him as a continual accuser. How powerful is the voice of conscience! Amidst all the pomps of a palace it will speak, and make the king upon his throne tremble. The mind of Herod could not be quieted by all the blandishments of his amorous queen, nor by his own libertine principles. He is generally supposed to have embraced the Sadducean notion of the soul's mortality, and to have disbelieved a resurrection. But, in the present case, he could not act the infidel: recollecting the violence he had committed, he was troubled by the apprehension of John's returning to life. Let us learn to reverence that monitor which we feel within us; for, if we attend not to its dictates in due season, it may prove a severe tormentor.

The uneasiness of Herod had no good effect. As he afterwards threatened to destroy Jesus, it is obvious that he remained an "enemy of all righteousness." Our Lord despised his menaces, and, in reply, calling him a fox, has justified the conclusion that

* Jer. xx. 3, 4.

the king possessed the subtle and voracious disposition of that wild and detested animal*. It was the same Herod before whom the Saviour stood arraigned as a criminal, just before his crucifixion †. He was glad of the opportunity to examine so remarkable a prisoner; but his motive was no better than a curious desire of seeing some miracle performed by this worker of wonders. He proposed a variety of questions, to which Jesus returned no answer. Our Lord well knew his character, what opportunities of information he had neglected, what convictions he had resisted, and therefore refused to afford him any further instructions. This circumstance conveys a solemn admonition. "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation ‡." The gracious offers which are yet made, if contemptuously rejected, may never be repeated.

Unhappy Herod! Had he been properly affected, even then, with a sense of his condition,—had he possessed an honest, humble, teachable disposition,—that interview with the Saviour would have been a blessing indeed. But, as the case stood, it tended only to aggravate his guilt and condemnation. He treated the Lord Christ with insolent contempt, as if his pretensions to royalty were absurd in the extreme. He "set him at nought, and mocked him, and arrayed him in a gorgeous robe, and sent him again to Pilate." Those two unrighteous governors, who had been at variance, were reconciled on that occasion, and then, probably, joined their counsels together, in opposition to the Redeemer. It is not uncommon for sinners, who are incensed against each other, to lay aside their private quarrels and party distinctions, that they may unite with greater force against the Gospel. O Lord, "Of a truth, against thy holy Child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together §."

At last the judgment of God overtook this proud

* Luke xiii. 31, 32. † xxiii. 7—12. ‡ 2 Cor. vi. 2. § Acts iv. 27 offender.

offender. He suffered such a total defeat in battle from Aretas, king of Arabia, whose daughter he had married and divorced, that the Jews themselves considered it as the effect of divine vengeance upon him, for the murder of John the Baptist*. He was afterwards driven from his high station with disgrace, and both he and his adulterous queen died in exile at Lyons in Gaul.

Such was Herod: but now, turning our attention to ourselves, let us inquire, What is our own character? Will any persons undertake to justify the licentious conduct which is here exhibited? Sinners, do you not perceive the ruinous tendency of your evil passions? What fruit have you received, or are you likely to receive? Is not the faithful servant of Christ, under all his contempt and persecution, more truly honourable and happy than the king of Galilee? And, if we look beyond the present scene, how tremendous a prospect opens upon all those "that know not God, and that obey not the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ †!" O "repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin ‡!" "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world §!" "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life ||."

* Josephus. † 2 Thess. i. 8. ‡ Ezek. xviii. 30. § John i. 29.
|| iii. 16.

SAINT STEPHEN.

CHAP. VIII.

Stephen chosen a deacon—his faith and zeal—con-founded certain disputants—arraigned before the sanhedrim—shone with a miraculous lustre—entered on his defence—incensed the council—saw heaven opened—commended his soul to Jesus—prayed for his murderers—died—was buried and lamented.

IN different ages the church of Christ has struggled with extreme violence of opposition. This has tended to exhibit the enmity of the human heart against true religion; but it has also given occasion to the brightest displays of the power, love, and faithfulness of God, in administering support and comfort to his suffering people. In the mean time the Gospel has received abundant confirmation, while many have cheerfully endured contempt and tortures, and laid down their lives, in its defence. May every reader be encouraged "to follow the Lamb" through severest difficulties, and learn from the present example to exercise prudence and meekness, as well as zeal and courage, in his service!

We are now called to contemplate the character of one who imbibed much of the Saviour's spirit, trod in his steps with singular firmness, and, after eminent usefulness, obtained, before any others in the Christian church, the honourable crown of martyrdom. Amongst that illustrious company, who have fought and bled in a glorious manner for the testimony of Jesus, none shines with greater splendour than St. Stephen. In his dying behaviour, especially, we perceive a rich assemblage of graces, which we should keep in view for our own imitation.

He is introduced to our notice as one of the seven first deacons at Jerusalem. That the Apostles might be relieved from the care of the poor, and give themselves entirely to the spiritual duties of their function, proper persons were chosen for the regular and impartial distribution of the public money; though it is presumed their attention was not confined merely to temporal concerns*. None, doubtless, were invested with this office, but such as were of known integrity, piety, and discretion. The direction of the Apostles was, "Look ye out from among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business." Of this description was St. Stephen. He stands the foremost in the list, and probably surpassed the rest in his gifts and attainments. "They chose Stephen, a man full of faith, and of the Holy Ghost."

O, how desirable it is that all the departments in the church were occupied by persons of similar endowments! Those who are not previously possessed of spiritual knowledge and experience, in private life, are not likely to discharge any public trust with credit and advantage. Preferment generally proves a snare and a curse to those who do not sincerely devote themselves to the service of God, and exert their abilities, whatever they may be, for his glory: and such cases stamp reproach and infamy on our holy profession. Let us pray that God would raise up among us faithful witnesses for his truth, and open the way for their admission to those sacred functions for which he is pleased to qualify them by his Spirit. Thus we may hope that his work will be revived, and the general languor which we now lament succeeded by real fervour of devotion.

At the period to which we here refer, we contemplate the church in a prosperous state. Its ministers were all diligent and vigorous, and the con-

* Acts vi. 1, &c.

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duct of its various members consistent and honourable. Accordingly, as we might expect, "the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly." Their external circumstances, also, were favourable. Gamaliel's advice had stopped the rage of persecution for a season. But the amazing propagation of the faith, through the zealous exertions of some principal characters, again excited a furious opposition. Such a man as St. Stephen, so laborious and useful in the service, could not long remain unnoticed by the adversaries; and at him especially, as one standing in the front of the battle, their envenomed darts were levelled. "Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and miracles among the people." Having felt in himself the blessedness of the Gospel, he could the more earnestly recommend it to others. He preached with peculiar fervour, and confirmed his doctrines by the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit which he possessed. Attempts were therefore made to confound and silence this zealous advocate for Christ.

Certain persons, probably of distinguished abilities and learning, from the different synagogues in Jerusalem, attempted to oppose him by argument; and he was not backward to declare and maintain the truth before these subtle disputants. In this contest he gained, through divine assistance, a decided victory. He spake by a wisdom superior to his own, which astonished and irresistibly overpowered his antagonists. They were baffled, and, though not driven from the field, obliged to change their mode of attack. When reasoning failed, they tried the effect of slanderous and malicious invectives. Men in general are disposed to misrepresent and revile what they have in vain endeavoured to confute. Accusations were sought for, and perfidious wretches hired to assert a base calumny. The minds of the people were inflamed, and even the principal persons of the city engaged in the opposition. Stephen was apprehended.

apprehended, and with rage and violence dragged before the grand council of the sanhedrim. A show of justice was preserved: the prisoner was put upon his trial, and witnesses called, who declared, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses, and against God." In support of their accusation it was alleged that Stephen had predicted the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and a change of the Mosaic law, through the interposition of that Jesus whom he had preached.

The charge was false: probably he had not spoken all that was asserted, and the prediction in itself, in its utmost extent, was far removed from blasphemy or profaneness. He might have used certain expressions concerning the vengeance which the Lord would execute upon them for their unbelief: and these they maliciously misconstrued and perverted, adding somewhat of their own, and inferring from them more than could justly be concluded. In the same way the characters of religious persons more frequently suffer by oblique insinuations, unfair deductions, and wrong interpretations, than by direct lies. We need not be surprised, if, in our defence of the truth, our words be wilfully mistaken, and "our good be evil-spoken of." We owe it to the overruling influence of God's providence, wonderfully restraining the malevolence of his enemies, that we are at any time preserved from the poisonous attacks of false tongues. If we consider how soon our reputation, substance, liberty, or life itself, might be taken away, only by "setting up false witnesses," as in the case of Stephen, we shall see abundant reason to admire and praise the power and wisdom of God, by which he keeps the world in awe.

The prisoner stood at the bar, and, the charge being brought, the eyes of the court were fixed upon him. And what did they behold? Were there any signs of guilt, any terror or confusion, discoverable in his countenance? No: they saw him not only composed and undaunted, but filled with lively joy, and

and shining with a radiant brightness, like the lustre which appeared in the face of Moses when he came down from the mount of God. This was more than the natural effects of a good conscience, of a pure zeal for God, or an assurance of his love; though these will afford support and comfort in extreme dangers. Here a miraculous, a divine splendour was diffused, which was a singular honour conferred upon St. Stephen, and which his enemies ought to have acknowledged as an evident token that God was with him. They "saw his face, as it had been the face of an angel," majestic and glorious. Were they not, then, so struck with the phenomenon, as to desist from the prosecution, "lest they should be found even to fight against God?" Alas! such is the blindness and obduracy of the human heart, that no external evidence will, of itself, produce any proper religious convictions: not the vision of an angel from heaven; nor the testimony of a miserable spirit, if released from its confinement in hell*.

Accordingly, the court, disregarding this uncommon appearance, proceeded in the trial, and the high-priest, as president of the council, put the prisoner upon his defence†. Then Stephen spake in his own vindication. Yet perhaps, upon viewing the strain of the holy advocate, we may view him as an orator who brought, rather than repelled, an accusation. More solicitous to save his audience than procure his discharge, he solemnly warned them not to reject the gracious proposal of God by his faithful servants, as many of their forefathers had done. We cannot here enlarge upon the different parts of this animated address, which bears the clearest marks of profound wisdom. He endeavoured to fix their attention by giving a short detail of their history; and, while he showed the various dispensations of mercy to their nation, the tendency of his discourse was to deliver them from a blind attachment to their external privileges, their boasted forms and ceremonies. He

* Luke xvi. 31.

† Acts vii. 1, &c.

observed, that the Lord had called and blessed their ancestors before their law was published or their temple built. Yet he expressed himself in such terms, both of their ritual and place of worship, as evinced his high veneration for them, and refuted the charge of blasphemy, for which he had been arraigned. He proved that the base spirit of opposition to God and his plans, which they then discovered, had appeared at different times among their progenitors, and intimated their danger of incurring a tremendous condemnation.

The sermon is not to be considered as complete: it is only a part of what he seems to have intended, if they would have given him a patient hearing. But, probably, as he opened his design, they began to show marks of violent commotion, so that he might perceive, from their countenances, a purpose of interrupting his discourse. He endeavoured, therefore, to draw towards a conclusion, by making a warm and pointed application to his audience. He boldly charged them with imitating the perverseness of the ancient Israelites, obstinately resisting the Holy Ghost, murdering the very Saviour whom their own prophets had foretold, and contemptuously violating that law of which they boasted. This was more than they could bear: "they were cut to the heart," not with godly sorrow, as the converts on the day of Pentecost*, but with indignation and rage. They could not preserve even an external decorum, through the violence of their resentment; "they gnashed upon him with their teeth," like beasts of prey, ready to tear and devour him.

St. Stephen, then, had nothing to expect but immediate destruction: yet he remained undaunted. The Lord God conferred upon him a more signal honour than before. Such abundant consolations were administered to the poor persecuted saint as enabled him to be collected in the face of his furious enemies, though he seemed to lie at their mercy.

* Acts ii. 37.

The glories of the heavenly world were unfolded to his view, and he experienced within his enraptured soul a large measure of its blessedness. What a striking contrast is here exhibited between him and his adversaries! THEY felt diabolical tempers, which constitute a part of infernal misery; HE, possessing peace and joy unspeakable, exulted as if he had been translated into the immediate presence of God. Under the full influence of the Holy Ghost, he disregarded their rage, and looked up with fixed attention, as if he were appealing to the righteous Judge of all. He saw the splendour which encircles the throne of God, and the Saviour himself standing at the right hand of the divine Majesty, engaged for his defence, and waiting to receive him.

The man of God, fired with a holy transport, and not attending to his own situation, declared the delightful vision. The believer, when favoured with heavenly consolations, may frequently be unable to conceal his emotions, and, without consulting the dictates of worldly prudence, may call upon others to admire the greatness of his joy. But it is not probable that sinners will credit such accounts as accord not with their own experience. Thus the persecutors of St. Stephen, so far from being convinced by his relation of the wondrous fact, were the more incensed. Confirmed in their former opinion, they concluded that he was a blasphemer, who ought not to be permitted to live. The council broke up in the utmost confusion: they stopped their ears, that they might not be shocked by his profaneness, rushed upon him with furious rage, and hurried him out of the city, that they might destroy him by stoning.

It is remarked, that, among those who encouraged this violent outrage, was a young man named Saul, who soon afterwards became a principal pillar of the church, and preached the faith which he then hated and opposed. He gave consent to Stephen's death, and, in testimony of approbation, took in charge the garments of those who shed his blood. How lamentable

able their blind and intemperate zeal! They supposed that they were doing God service*, and pretended a regard to his law. But, alas! they knew not what were their real principles. O Lord, deliver us from such grievous delusion: and, while we profess to contend for thy truth and glory, suffer us not to be carried away by the tempers of Satan!

We turn our eyes from the madness of the murderers, to contemplate the conduct of the dying saint. With unshaken courage, with sweet composure, with lively faith and fervent love, he closed his valuable life, and left a bright pattern for the admiration of the church in every succeeding age. While they hurled upon him the instruments of destruction, he looked up in prayer, and commended his soul into the hands of the Saviour, whom he beheld in glory. "Knowing in whom he had believed, and being persuaded that he was able to keep that which he committed unto him against that day †," he exclaimed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

We remark to whom his solemn petition was addressed, and we are at no loss to collect his opinion of the divine nature of Christ. He considered him, evidently, as possessed of power to preserve the sacred deposit then intrusted to him, and as "the true God," who demands supreme reverence and worship. None will presume to insinuate that this eminent saint, "being full of the Holy Ghost," could die in the commission of idolatry. But this horrible position must be maintained, if it be not allowed that Jesus Christ is God, equal with the Father. It is observable that Stephen here paid the same adoration to the Redeemer, in delivering up to him the care of his departing soul, which the Redeemer himself offered to the Father, when he said, "Into thy hands I commend my spirit ‡."

Amidst volleys of stones, which were cast upon his bruised body, Stephen continued unshaken in his mind. Confident of his own security, he felt the

* John xvi. 2. † 2 Tim. ii. 12. ‡ Luke xxiii. 46.

tenderest

tenderest compassion for the persons who were bringing upon themselves the guilt of innocent blood, and prayed aloud upon his bended knees that their heinous offence might not rise up in judgment to their condemnation. He cried, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." How amiable the temper here manifested! What an illustrious display of the power of divine grace! What a striking resemblance between the dying conduct of this holy martyr and that of the blessed Redeemer, who likewise, in his last moments, thus interceded for his murderers, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do*!"

The whole of St. Stephen's deportment proved that he was superior to all the menaces and cruelties of his enemies. When he had offered up his devout supplications for them, "he fell asleep:" he met his dissolution with as much composure as if he were retiring from the fatigues of the day, and seeking rest and refreshment in sleep for his weary body. Such is the close of life to the believer in Jesus. Surely we are constrained to say, "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them †."—"Them, also, which sleep in Jesus, will God bring with him ‡."

The departure of this illustrious saint, so glorious and happy to himself, appeared a heavy loss to the church, especially in such a season of violent persecution. As a testimony of the high estimation in which he was held, "devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him §." It is not wrong to desire that useful lives may be spared, or, when they are taken away, to grieve for the many inconveniences which we may sustain, and the obstruction which may be apprehended to the work of God. But is it thus that the enemies of true religion die? Their removal is frequently an acknowledged blessing to society. "The wicked

* Luke xxiii. 34. † Rev. xiv. 13. ‡ 1 Thess. iv. 14. § Acts viii. 1.

driven

driven away in his wickedness:" and "when the wicked perish, there is shouting*."

A serious review of this singular narration will suggest various instructions.

1. It will confirm us in the belief of the Gospel. Among other evidences in support of our holy faith, we may produce the sufferings of its primitive teachers, as furnishing a very strong argument. They surely, who had the best opportunities of examining, were persuaded of its truth and excellency, since they cheerfully endured the severest tortures in its defence. Stephen was the first who died in the cause; but many others soon followed his example. Could they be actuated by interested views? Did they conduct themselves like impostors? The holy martyr, whom we here contemplate, plainly found in his last moments the reality and blessedness of that religion which he so powerfully maintained. By the peaceful and triumphant manner of his death, in such circumstances of bodily pain, he has left an unquestionable proof that our Redeemer is mighty. Many private Christians, likewise, at the hour of their departure, though they suffer not by the hand of violence, yet put it beyond a doubt, by their heavenly tempers and lively joys, that their system is not a "cunningly devised fable," or their faith a vain delusion. *O let us listen to their testimony, and be animated by their example! May our last end be like theirs; and, when we are closing our eyes upon every thing below, may we be able to say, "I know that my Redeemer liveth!"*

2. It will teach us how to meet the fiercest opposition for the truth's sake. Our observations on this head may be thought ill suited to the present state of things. We grant that the same violence of persecution which occurred in former time does not now prevail. We allow the candour of the age: we are thankful for the mild and equitable laws which prevent or punish any outrage upon our persons.

* Prov. xiv. 33. xi. 10.

But

But there is still "the strife of tongues," the "trial of cruel mockings," which cannot be restrained: and these have considerable influence in deterring men from a zealous profession of religion. Though we are not called to martyrdom, it must be felt as extremely painful to be despised and calumniated by those whose friendship we are anxious to preserve.

We learn, however, from Stephen's example, to resist our enemies with prudence and courage. If, like him, we would "put to silence the ignorance of foolish men," we should be able to give a consistent account of our faith, and defend our principles. Much wisdom, also, will be requisite, in order to adapt our discourse to the circumstances in which we may be placed. Yet let us beware of cowardice, and, while we behold Stephen's intrepidity, determine never to desert the cause of truth for the sake of conciliating the esteem of its opposers. What have we to fear if we serve the Lord Christ?

The present history teaches us, likewise, to unite with an immovable firmness the exercise of meekness and love. Stephen complained not of the injurious treatment which he received. Instead of throwing out bitter invectives, he testified his readiness to pardon, by commending his murderers to the mercy and forgiveness of God. By such a singular display of forbearance and kindness he brought more credit to the Gospel than he could have done by any other arguments. Have we learnt to suffer with a similar disposition? Ah! how much do we dishonour the cause of Christ by the peevishness of our spirit, and the keenness of our resentment against those who approach or insult us! Do we not prove that we have not yet understood the extent of that holiness which our religion requires?

3. It encourages us to expect sufficient strength and comfort under all our persecutions for righteousness sake. This primitive martyr stands as a witness for the grace and faithfulness of his divine Master, who will never abandon or deceive his upright servants.

servants. That ancient promise is verified in the case of every sincere believer: "As thy days, so shall thy strength be*." And will not this suffice us? If the world frown, yet Jesus will smile: if they curse, He will command a blessing. Whatever may be taken from us for our attachment to him, He will make us abundant compensation. Though the most numerous and powerful adversaries declare against us, we may exult in dependence on his veracity, and say, "The Lord is on my side, I will not fear †."

We need not, we ought not, to stagger at the most terrible appearances of death. We perceive in St. Stephen's countenance how Jesus can lighten the dark valley, and even in that tremendous passage fill our souls with peace and joy. Why should we not hope to maintain such a holy confidence? This, at least, the grace of our God can bestow. Indeed, without a vision, we are sure of what is beyond the present scene: the veil of the heavens is even rent to us, and we contemplate the Saviour waiting to receive us to mansions of eternal blessedness. Let us persevere in faith and patience, and soon shall the portals be thrown wide open for our honourable admission. "If we suffer, we shall also reign with him ‡." For thus he addresses every Christian soldier enlisted under his banner, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life §."

We pray therefore with our Church;

"Grant, O Lord, that in all our sufferings here upon earth, for the testimony of thy truth, we may steadfastly look up to heaven, and by faith behold the glory that shall be revealed: and, being filled with the Holy Ghost, may learn to love and bless our persecutors by the example of thy first martyr, St. Stephen, who prayed for his murderers to thee, O blessed Jesus, who standest at the right hand of God to succour all those who suffer for thee, our only Mediator and Advocate. Amen ||."

* Deut. xxxiii. 25. † Psal. cxviii. 6. ‡ 2 Tim. ii. 12.
§ Rev. ii. 10. || Collect for St. Stephen's Day.

SAINT PAUL.

CHAP. IX.—SECT. I.

Paul, his extraction and education—a bigoted Pharisee—persecuted the church—suddenly stopped by an appearance of Christ—brought to acknowledge and submit to him—struck blind—recovered his sight—baptized by Ananias—preached Christ—Observations on his conversion.

THE Lord God frequently accomplishes his purposes by such instruments as are thought weak and contemptible, and thus proves that his cause is not indebted to any human abilities for support. But, at some times, and for special purposes, He is pleased to select persons of admired endowments, whom infidelity would gladly have classed among its advocates, and to render them of extensive service to the interests of Christianity. Alas! how often do splendid gifts become a snare and a curse, not to the possessors only, but to society, being employed in defence of erroneous and destructive principles! How different is the case when they are consecrated to the Lord, and devoted to the use of the sanctuary! Then indeed they appear truly excellent, deserve our highest esteem, and contribute to the temporal and eternal happiness of men.

Such reflections arise from the consideration of the character now before us. St. Paul was furnished with large intellectual powers, and ample attainments in literature, which would have done credit to any cause. But it is our province to contemplate the Christian rather than the scholar, and to admire, not so much his natural genius and abilities, as "the exceeding grace

grace of God in him." That grace stamped a dignity and worth on all his qualifications, and gave them their proper direction and employment. Let us hear his own grateful acknowledgment: "By the grace of God I am what I am*." None ever shone with greater lustre than he did, after he had once entered on the service of Christ: none seem to have arrived at a higher degree of perfection, or to have been honoured with more extensive usefulness in the world. We thank God for the amazing effects of his preaching, and especially for his inspired compositions, which constitute a considerable part of the New Testament, and which will descend as an inestimable blessing to ages yet unborn. May we all partake of the same spirit, and learn from his example and exhortations to yield ourselves to the Saviour with the warmest affections, and with unreserved obedience!

Saul (for such was his name originally) was born at Tarsus in Cilicia, and, through peculiar favour granted to the natives of that place, entitled to the freedom and privileges of a Roman citizen †. He sprang from Jewish parents, and boasted that he could trace his descent from Abraham, and had conformed to all ritual injunctions; "circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of Hebrews ‡." He was taught the common business of a tent-maker §; but we cannot on that account conclude that he was confined to any servile labour, or placed in a mean situation ||. He enjoyed the advantages of a liberal education, being well instructed in the learning of the times, and furnished with a considerable share of reading in the Greek and Latin writers.

Probably at an early age he went to Jerusalem, to

* 1 Cor. xv. 10. † Acts xxii. 3, 98.

‡ 2 Cor. xi. 22. Phil. iii. 5. § Acts xviii. 3.

|| It was customary with the Jews, even the most opulent, to train up their children to the knowledge of some trade, by which they might be able to earn their support in life, if they should be reduced to difficulties.

acquire

acquire the necessary acquaintance with Jewish literature, with the principles of his own religion, and the most generally received interpretations of the Old Testament. For those purposes he was placed under the celebrated Doctor, Gamaliel, and, as his pupil, "brought up at his feet." There he made considerable proficiency in his studies, and soon discovered a zealous attachment to all the Mosaic institutions. Such an attachment might be greatly increased by the influence of his tutor: at least he came out from under his care a rigid bigoted Pharisee. He laid an undue stress on the observance of Jewish ceremonies: and, as he could not bear to hear of their abolition or insufficiency, he imbibed with his first rudiments a spirit of opposition to the Gospel. He thought, and it seemed to be a firm conviction, that it was his bounden duty to exert himself against the Christian faith; "that he ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth*."

He acted, as would generally be allowed, sincerely, and according to the dictates of his conscience, while he persecuted, and wished, if possible, to extirpate, the professors of this new religion. But the plea of sincerity and conscience will not excuse him. It was his sin, as it is the sin of many, not to be better informed: a blamable and corrupt temper of mind prevented him from giving the Gospel a serious attention and fair examination. He must have had many opportunities of being acquainted with its evidence, during his residence at Jerusalem; but he was not disposed to see the truth of a system which totally subverted his proud principles; he obstinately refused to admit the light which was offered. Hence he became "a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious †;" presumptuously uttering profane speeches against the Lord Christ, setting himself in opposition to all who called upon his name, and treating them with every species of violence. He concluded that he was

* Acts xxvi. 5, 9. Gal. i. 14. † 1 Tim. i. 13.

doing

doing God service; a sentiment that betrayed an extreme blindness and depravity*.

A. D. The sacred history first introduces his name
34. upon the death of St. Stephen. When that holy martyr was stoned, Saul, who had probably been present at Stephen's solemn sermon, gave his approbation and assistance to the perpetration of the horrid murder †. He proceeded much further. With a furious and voracious disposition, like a beast of prey, he pursued the disciples of Christ, that he might tear and devour them. He went great lengths indeed before it pleased God to stop his mad career. "He made havoc of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women," paying no deference to sex or age, "committed them to prison ‡." He confesses that he "imprisoned and beat in every synagogue them that believed §;" that he "punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme, and, being exceedingly mad against them, persecuted them even unto strange cities ||." It is obvious that he sought nothing less than their total extirpation. "He breathed out threatenings and slaughter ¶;" as if, with every breath he drew, he denounced vengeance and destruction to the poor saints. He applied for the influence and authority of the high-priest, who probably was not backward to countenance and promote his plans, that he might carry his persecution even to the distant city of Damascus. And on this expedition he set out, in company with others, who were commissioned to assist him in his purposes, or whom similar fury and malice prompted to attend him.

After such an account, can any doubt be entertained of the real state of his mind at that time? Whatever may be said of his integrity or good intentions, is it not evident, from this description, that he was then "in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond

* John xvi. 2, 3. † Acts vii. 58. viii. 1. xxii. 20. ‡ viii. 3.
§ xxii. 19. || xxvi. 11. ¶ ix. 1, 2.

of iniquity?" Shall we not allow his own confession, that he was "the chief of sinners," "not meet to be called an Apostle, because he persecuted the church of God*?" The principles by which he was actuated, and the conduct he pursued, were highly offensive to God; so that we cannot but consider him, in that period of his life, as obnoxious to the divine indignation. We grant that he preserved a strict regularity of manners; that his deportment was moral, in the common acceptation of morality, and even blameless before men. He was also constant and exact in all the offices of external devotion: but his religion was the offspring of pride and ignorance. He "went about to establish his own righteousness," and maintained a confident assurance of his safety. Alas! he "was alive without the law †:" he understood not the extensive and spiritual demands of God's precepts, or the tremendous consequence of the least deviation from duty. He was therefore elated with a conceit of his goodness; though, at the very time, his obedience was not only partial, but wrong throughout. With all his fair appearances and high pretensions, he "was in the flesh, and the motions of sins which were by the law, did work in his members to bring forth fruit unto death ‡."

Some have supposed, that, on account of his sincerity, he possessed a previous disposition to receive the Gospel. But men of such a Pharisaical spirit as he showed are the most unwilling to "submit unto the righteousness of God." Others have represented his state and character in so favourable a light, that no considerable change could be necessary; nay, that he deserved the grace which was afterwards bestowed, as a reward for his integrity. How contrary to this were his own sentiments! In all his writings he describes his guilt as extremely heinous and aggravated, and speaks with astonishment of the mercy of God, from which he seemed to be further removed than

* 1 Tim. i. 15. † 1 Cor. xv. 9. ‡ Rom. vii. 9.
‡ vii. 5.

any other sinner: he is always ready to produce his own case as the most extraordinary instance of forgiveness extended to an atrocious offender.

Yet we allow that his ignorance, though it forms not an excuse, is in some sense a palliation*. Had he proceeded the same lengths in opposing Christ, against clear information and strong convictions, we apprehend that he would have been given up to a judicial hardness, beyond the possibility of pardon. Let none flatter themselves that the want of instruction will be a sufficient security. The most awful denunciations are levelled against those who know not God and his truth †. You may be confident of your own rectitude, and yet be grievously deceived. Even a misguided conscience may prove destructive. Though you abstain from gross immoralities, and be admired for your punctual attention to religious duties, your prevailing tempers may be such as to render you odious to God. Come, and learn from the example before us the necessity of a total renovation. There is an universal depravity of nature, which requires to be subdued. You must "put off the old man, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind ‡;" and, till this be effected, your pretended obedience is detestable, as proceeding from corrupt motives.

A. D. Such a change took place in Saul when he was ³⁵ about the age of twenty-four years, as is generally supposed, and within two or three after the death of Christ. Young as he was, he had given full proof of a decided and bitter opposition to the Gospel. He had, indeed, been "separated from his mother's womb §," in the counsels of God: but the call was long deferred, that the riches of divine grace might be more gloriously exhibited. We are now to behold the Lord Jesus, who had shown all long-suffering, taking to himself his great power, subduing in an instant the fierce enmity of the rebel, and attaching

* 1 Tim. i. 13. † 1 Cor. xv. 34. ‡ Thess. i. 9.
‡ Eph. iv. 22, 23. § Gal. i. 15.

him

him by the strongest ties of affection to his own person and service.

Saul had come into the neighbourhood of Damascus with murderous rage against all the disciples of Jesus, and, possibly, was anticipating the pleasure he should receive in binding and torturing them*. He was within view of the city, when suddenly the appearance of an uncommon brightness and glory shining from heaven, which far exceeded the splendour of the sun, checked his progress. This occurred at mid-day, which rendered the phenomenon the more singular. Both Saul and his companions were instantly struck to the ground, dazzled and confounded. The voice of insulted Majesty reproved him with peculiar solemnity, and thus called him to account for his injurious conduct; "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?"

It should seem that not only was this remarkable address distinctly heard, but some august Personage was exhibited to his view. Saul inquired, "Who art thou, Lord?" Probably Christ manifested himself in human form, encircled with that lustre which he possesses in his present exaltation, while the answer was returned, "I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks." As if he had said, "I, who appear before thee with such marks of elevated dignity, am no other than the despised Nazarene, against whom thy rage is ultimately directed. I consider the insults and oppression which my faithful people suffer as offered to myself. But thy furious attempts, in the final event, cannot hurt me or my cause: thou art only wounding thyself. Cease, then, from thy foolish and wicked opposition."

Wonderful indeed was the condescension of the Lord, in arguing with one so full of enmity! It was amazing forbearance and compassion that he did not "make bare his holy arm," destroy the persecutor, and leave him a monument of righteous vengeance.

* Acts ix. 3—22. xxii. 6—16. xxvi. 12—20.

But

But he spoke in mercy, and yet spoke effectually. Saul instantly submitted with unfeigned contrition, and presumed not to allege any thing in his own defence. A sudden conviction of his enormous guilt, and a sight of the glory of the Redeemer, whom he had so daringly provoked, almost overwhelmed him with fear and astonishment. Perhaps doubting whether there could be any hope for him, yet resolved to try the effect of an humble application, he cried out, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Thus resigning himself into the hands of Jesus, he obtained forgiveness. He was directed to go into the city for further instruction, and encouraged by an assurance that he should be appointed a minister of the Gospel, with a *divine commission*, under the immediate protection of Heaven. It was declared that *he should be the favoured instrument of carrying the glad tidings of salvation to Heathen lands, and extending to many souls the various blessings of the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*

The vision being ended, Saul arose; but the stupendous lustre which had shone upon him deprived him of sight. His eyes were closed in darkness; an emblem of the former blindness of his soul. Unable, therefore, to guide himself, he was conducted to Damascus, where he continued, probably in extreme confusion and distress, for three days, without beholding any object or receiving any food. That season he employed in serious recollection and fervent prayer, humbly waiting for further deliverance. The Lord graciously remarked the change, and said of him, "Behold, he prayeth!" He had, even from his youth, repeated forms of devotion; but never before that period had his heart been raised to Heaven with earnest supplication. It pleases God, in general, to afford young converts opportunity for the exercise of penitential sorrow and importunate cries for mercy before he pours in upon them the clear light and full comforts of the Gospel. This may be a time of heaviness, but it furnishes an useful and necessary

cessary preparation of mind; and joy at length will certainly succeed.

A disciple at Damascus was sent by express revelation to restore to Saul his lost sight, and confirm him in the Christian faith. The coming and design of that messenger had also been intimated to Saul by a previous vision; and this coincidence of circumstances proved more evidently that the whole transaction was the mighty work of God, and not a delusion or imposture. Ananias was the person commissioned to visit the "chosen vessel;" and by his means Saul was instantly delivered from blindness, filled with the Holy Ghost, furnished with miraculous powers, and admitted by baptism into the church of Christ.

What a change was this! He, who had intended to harass and torment the disciples, joined himself to them as their friend and brother, and esteemed it the highest honour to become a follower and preacher of Jesus the Nazarene, whose name he had treated with blasphemous contempt. Having received full information both of the facts and doctrines of the Gospel, by direct communications from Heaven, he "conferred not with flesh and blood*," consulted not the dictates of worldly prudence or carnal inclinations, but immediately began to declare and maintain, in the synagogues of Damascus, what he had learnt by revelation, and proved, to the astonishment of those who had known his former character, that Jesus is indeed the promised Saviour. Thus he "preached the faith, which once he destroyed †," and soon appeared to be "a vessel unto honour, sanctified and meet for the Master's use ‡." Shall we not "glorify God in him?" "Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel, who only doeth wondrous things: and blessed be his glorious name for ever §."

The continuance and good effects of this change demonstrate that it was no fiction, nor the produc-

* Gal. i. 16. † i. 23. ‡ 2 Tim. ii. 21. § Psal. lxxii. 18, 19.

tion of terror or of fancy, but a real conversion, accomplished by the immediate interposition of the Lord from heaven. From the moment that Saul was first struck to the ground, what an astonishing difference did he manifest in his whole spirit and conduct! Where is now the fury of the persecutor? and what is become of all his murderous designs against the believers at Damascus? "The wolf dwells with the lamb, and the leopard lies down with the kid," no longer seeking to "hurt" or "destroy*." Where is the tongue of the blasphemer, so accustomed to utter profane speeches against Christ? The very mention of Jesus of Nazareth would have provoked his indignation: but no sooner does the Saviour reveal his grace and glory, than the fierce adversary relinquishes all further plans of opposition, is ashamed of his former enmity, and, alarmed for his future safety, he cries for mercy, acknowledges the divine character, and desires to follow the directions of Jesus. "O Lord, what I know not, teach thou me; guide me into that way in which I have foolishly refused to walk; rescue my guilty soul from deserved wrath, and show me what thou requirest to be done. I give myself to thee, and desire to live in cheerful and unreserved obedience to thy precepts." Such is the purport of his devout exclamation, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" This is the language of conversion; and this effect could no more be produced by natural causes than the sun could be obstructed in its course, or the rivers made to flow backward in their channels, without a miraculous interference.

At the period here referred to, as we apprehend, "the commandment came, sin revived, and he died †." While his mind was deeply impressed with a conviction of the purity and extent of the law, he felt within himself the powerful working of a corrupt nature, and saw that as a transgressor, under condemnation, he was liable to perish. The haughty

* Isa. xi. 6-9.

† Rom. vii. 9.

Pharisee,

Pharisee, therefore, was turned into a weeping penitent. "Through the law," he became "dead to the law*;" he gave up all the proud expectations which he had entertained from his own obedience; and "what things were gain to him, those he counted loss for Christ †." The ground of his former dependence failing, he relinquished it, and surrendered himself to Jesus, in whom he then trusted for salvation, and to whose service he devoted the whole of his future life. From that moment he continued zealously attached to the cause of Christ, though under the strongest possible temptations to desert it, and laboured more abundantly than any others. Shall we not say, with devout affections, "This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes ‡?"

But the benefits were not confined to St. Paul alone. We are not told how his companions were affected, who probably were equally ignorant, or equally malevolent, with himself. For some time they remained speechless, under an impression of great terror; but we know not that any of them became true converts. Yet there were others, for whose advantage this singular interposition was evidently designed. Many saw, confessed, and admired the change: many were convinced of the truth of the Gospel, and turned to the Lord. This new preacher, in his zeal to propagate the faith, travelled from city to city, from one kingdom to another; and thousands, believing his testimony, were added to the church. No menaces or sufferings from men could deter them from entering on the service of Christ, in whom they found a sufficient compensation, and a never-failing source of joy. They "shone as lights in the world, holding forth the word of life," and thus proved that the Apostle "had not run in vain, neither laboured in vain §."

What shall we say to such effects as these? They could not proceed from mere imagination; they demonstrate incontestably that the Christian system is

* Gal. ii. 19. † Phil. iii. 7. ‡ Psal. cxviii. 23. § Phil. ii. 15, 16.

not a delusion or a cheat. Let the declarations of St. Paul be regarded as they ought to be, and it must be allowed that our faith is divine. He affirms that he received it by the inspiration of the Almighty, and not by human teaching*. He preached it with zeal and success before he had any communication with the other Apostles; and they all perfectly coincided in their account both of facts and doctrines. Now to what shall we ascribe this exact agreement, if not to the influence of Heaven?

Shall Paul be deemed an impostor †? What motive could induce him to change his party, and contrive such a plan of deception? Did he seek for wealth, honour, power, or sensual gratification? No: all these he cheerfully renounced; and, while he patiently endured extreme afflictions, he proved, at least, that he firmly believed the Gospel. But was he not an enthusiast? No; the furthest from it possible. He betrayed no mark of an enthusiast, except his zeal should be represented in that light. We observe, however, that it was not the blind and furious zeal of a bigot or fanatic, but the generous ardour of one who knew the truth and felt the unspeakable importance of his commission. Besides, no supposition of enthusiasm can ever account for the success of his labours, which, of itself, evinces that the hand of the Lord was with him.

If it be said, that, though sincere, he might yet be deceived by others, we ask, By whom? By the disciples of Christ? They were hardly persuaded to credit his integrity, and the reality of his conversion; nor could the change originate from them, with whom he had no previous intercourse. And it will not surely be alleged that he was imposed on by his former associates, who sought his life for deserting their cause. The only fair conclusion is, that he was constituted an Apostle by the Lord Jesus, and

* Gal. i. 11, &c.

† See this subject clearly stated in Lyttleton's Observations on the Conversion and Apostleship of St. Paul.

that

that the doctrine which he preached is a revelation from heaven. Let us rejoice and give thanks for this interesting event, and pray that "the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ may shine unto us."

We admire the divine perfections as displayed in St. Paul's conversion. We cannot but perceive in it the sovereignty of God, who, without being accountable to us, raises up what instruments he pleases for his own service and glory. Let us dispute as we may, "He will have mercy on whom he will have mercy*." It becomes not us to quarrel with his appointments. "Who art thou that replest against God †?" The case before us shows how feeble is the strongest opposition to Him. What can the most furious persecutors effect? "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall have them in derision ‡." He can suddenly confound their purposes, strike terror into their hearts, abase and humble them, and even render them zealous advocates for his truth. "There is none like unto thee, O Lord; neither are there any works like unto thy works §!"

The wisdom of God, also, appears wonderful in selecting a person of St. Paul's former character, whom we should have thought most unlikely to be employed in the church of Christ. On many accounts he must be allowed to be a desirable and unexceptionable witness for the Gospel. Such had been his violent prejudice against it, and, afterwards, such was his patient submission to suffering, so firm the courage and unwearied the assiduity which he showed in its support, that, without considering his strong natural abilities, we admire the suitableness of his appointment to the ministry, though he "was before a blasphemer, a persecutor, and injurious."

In a most signal manner the rich mercy of our God, and the sufficiency of his grace in Jesus Christ, are here exhibited. St. Paul represents his own case as so remarkable in this view, that it may furnish en-

* Rom. ix. 15. † 20. ‡ Psal. ii. 4. § lxxxvi. 8.

couragemen

couragement to penitents in every age, whatever their former character may have been. He obtained forgiveness for this very purpose, that none might despair. The Saviour, who rescued him, can recover you who have departed the furthest from God: he can subdue your depravity, sanctify your polluted heart, and pardon your numerous and aggravated sins, even your fierce opposition to his Gospel, and profane blasphemies against himself. O, rejoice in that "faithful saying," which is indeed "worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*:" and, like the Apostle, "count all things but dung, that you may win Christ, and be found in Him †!"

* 1 Tim. i. 15.

† Phil. iii. 8. 9.

SAINT PAUL.

SECT. 2.

Paul, driven from Damascus, and then from Jerusalem, fled to Tarsus—accompanied Barnabas to Antioch in Syria, and thence to Jerusalem—sent forth with him to preach to the Gentiles, travelled through Cyprus—went to Perga, Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe—returned to Antioch in Syria—attended the council at Jerusalem—reproved Peter—separated from Barnabas.

RELIGION consists not in a system of merely speculative notions: the sentiments and affections which it excites in the heart produce such excellent fruits in the life as evince its holy nature and divine original. Who will not allow that this was eminently the case with St. Paul? We have already intimated that the truth of his conversion appeared by its effects: we must now appeal to the whole of his subsequent conduct for the proof of this observation. We shall perceive him, to the last moment, invariably and zealously attached to the cause of Christ, exerting himself not only as a soldier, but as a principal leader and commander, in the armies of the faithful. We cannot but remark with admiration his activity, courage, fervour, and perseverance: yet at the same time we may propose him as a bright pattern of meekness, patience, contempt of the world, purity, and spirituality of mind. Let it be our pleasing employment to accompany him from place to place, and contemplate the important purposes for which he was called and ordained to the Apostolic function.

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The lovers of history may here find enough to engage their attention and excite their wonder. We invite them to study the records of the primitive church, which abound with facts most curious and interesting, and are particularly entitled to regard, as proceeding from the pen of inspiration. Come and see the great Apostle, by his indefatigable labours, planting, watering, enlarging, and protecting, many Christian societies. Come and observe the kingdom of Satan shaken and subverted, and upon its ruins the kingdom of peace and righteousness established.

St. Paul began, immediately after his conversion, to declare the revelations he had received, and to preach Christ in the synagogues at Damascus*. There he continued for three years, excepting the time which he spent in Arabia, whither he retired for a season, and where, probably, he was favoured with clearer discoveries of divine truth †. He showed a particular concern for his unbelieving brethren among the Jews, and endeavoured with unremitting zeal to recommend the Gospel to their acceptance. Did they not credit his testimony? We might have supposed that such a witness would have removed every objection. But, alas! through the perverseness of nature, men are disposed to resist every effort for their salvation. Instead of listening to his arguments and exhortations, the Jews conspired against his life, and thus exhibited to his view a picture of what he himself had been. A formidable combination was entered into, and the governor of the city, together with his garrison, was employed to apprehend him. But their scheme failed; for what could all their counsels and preparations avail against the man whom the Lord of hosts defended? "Through a window in a basket he was let down by the wall, and escaped their hands ‡."

A.D. Upon that occasion he fled to Jerusalem, and there sought for the society of those very dis-

* Acts ix. 20, &c.

† Gal. i. 17.

‡ 2 Cor. xi. 32, 33.

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ciples whom he had once abhorred and persecuted. They, however, remembering his former character, and not having received a satisfactory account of his conversion, were backward to credit his professions, till Barnabas interfered, and related the important change which had taken place. For a few days he had free communications with the church, but was not indebted to the most eminent of the Apostles for his knowledge of the Gospel*. At Jerusalem he had been known as a violent enemy to the Christian faith; and therefore it might seem that his testimony in its support would there meet with peculiar regard. Yet it proved otherwise. His zeal for the honour of the Saviour soon excited the indignation of his countrymen; and, being again obliged to fly for his life, he was conducted with haste to Tarsus, his native city.

A.D. Here he obtained a safe retreat, and probably applied himself with diligence to the work of the ministry; but what was his success we are not informed. Nothing further is recorded of him during the three or four following years. Barnabas, at length, in great want of his assistance, found him at Tarsus, and prevailed on him to go to Antioch, the capital of Syria, where they laboured together for the space of a year with good effect †. Our Apostle, as we may conclude from his repeated visits, felt a peculiar attachment to the large and flourishing church which was gathered in that place: and there the disciples of Jesus first received the honourable appellation of CHRISTIANS. The name was once reproachful: we, perhaps, glory in it; but do we seriously consider, according to this profession, what is our relation to the Lord Jesus Christ, and what the ties which bind us to his person, and call for an inflexible attachment to his Gospel? Are we, what the title imports, his followers and servants?

* Gal. i. 18, 19. Perhaps to this period of his history we should refer the trance which he mentions, Acts xxii. 17.

† Acts xi. 25, &c.

Paul, and his intimate companion Barnabas, were sent from Antioch with certain charitable collections to the poor saints at Jerusalem, who were at that time distressed by famine: and, having faithfully executed their commission, they returned to Antioch, taking with them John Mark as their associate and assistant*.

A. D. At length, those holy men, filled with zeal
45. for God, went forth to propagate the Christian faith, upon a more extensive plan. In obedience to an express revelation from God, they were set apart by the solemn prayers of certain teachers in the church, and a peculiar influence of the Holy Ghost qualified them for carrying the glad tidings of salvation among the Heathens †. They had previously committed themselves to the Lord; and, in consequence of their engagements with him, considered themselves at his disposal. Without hesitation or reluctance, therefore, they obeyed the call, not declining the most painful services, nor shrinking from formidable dangers. They accounted it sufficient that the Lord was with them, and had assigned them their work. Ah! where shall we now find such an unfeigned regard to God and his cause? Do not "all seek their own, and not the things which are Jesus Christ's ‡?"

They went out like the Patriarch of old, "not knowing whither they went §," depending upon their Lord for guidance and protection. The other Apostles, also, were sent forth to evangelize the world; but little is told us concerning their labours. The sacred history of the church, from this period, is confined chiefly to the exertions and sufferings of St. Paul; and yet it does not relate the whole, or give us even the closing scene of his life.

Paul, therefore, and his beloved Barnabas, set out from Antioch upon their momentous embassy. Having arrived at Cyprus, a large island in the Mediterranean sea, they travelled through it, preaching

* Acts xii. 25. † xiii. 1, &c. ‡ Phil. ii. 21. § Heb. xi. 8.

by

by the way. At Paphos, a principal town, a singular occurrence happened. Sergius Paulus, the deputy or Roman governor of the country, discovered a favourable disposition, and expressed a desire to hear the Gospel. But Elymas, a noted magician in the place, endeavoured to prejudice him against it, probably through a fear of losing his own influence and importance. Immediately, however, at the word of Paul, this vile opposer of the faith, who laboured to keep others in spiritual darkness, was struck blind; and the ruler, convinced by the miracle, embraced the truth. Many circumstances conspire to prevent the free access of the ministers of Christ to persons of high rank. They, whose interest or ascendancy is likely to be subverted by an admission of the Gospel, may always be expected to resist it; and therefore Satan, doubtless, employs his instruments, if possible, to exclude religion from courts and palaces. But our God, who is mighty, can suddenly confound the purposes of his enemies, and render them subservient to his counsels. In due time, through the strong influence of his Spirit, even "kings shall fall down before him," and become "the nursing fathers" of his church*.

From Cyprus Paul and his companions went to Perga in Pamphylia; and there they were deserted by John Mark, who very dishonourably declined the service, and returned to Jerusalem. He did not renounce the faith; but his conduct was highly blamable, and produced bad consequences. Ah! what pain do sincere persons feel on account of such cases! Yet, considering what human nature is, we may expect to suffer, not only through the apostacy of false brethren, but also through the imprudence, sloth, and cowardice, of real Christians. We ought to mourn for the discredit brought upon our profession, and yet at the same time remember that "the foundation of God standeth sure †."

The zealous preachers whom we are here contem-

* Psal. lxxii. 41. Isa. xlix. 23. † 2 Tim. ii. 19.

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plating continued their progress. At Antioch in Pisidia (a different town and far distant from the Antioch before mentioned) they attended the public worship of the Jewish synagogue on the sabbath-day. After the usual service, being permitted to address the people, Paul arose and spake in a most animated manner, declaring and enforcing the grand truths of the Gospel. To impress their minds in favour of his doctrine, he began with explaining some of the divine dispensations towards their ancestors, particularly in promising the Saviour, and gradually preparing them for his reception. He then proceeded to exhibit Jesus as the Christ who had been predicted. He represented him as despised and rejected by the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and there most injuriously suffering the death of the cross. But he maintained that the whole of these transactions had occurred agreeably to their own Scriptures, and that according to express prophecies, which they themselves acknowledged, Jesus had been raised from the grave, and proved to be the very Saviour whom they professed to look for. He solemnly entreated them to consider that full and free redemption which was proposed to every believer, and warned them, by a tremendous denunciation, not to reject the gracious offer. Let us learn from the Apostle's sermon to be thankful for the clear light of the Gospel with which we are favoured. "To us is the word of this salvation sent." But do we truly understand its import? or do we cordially embrace it? O let us beware, lest we come under the condemnation of the despisers, who shall perish with aggravated ruin!

What was the effect of Paul's address? The generality of the congregation appear not to have been properly impressed: but certain Gentiles, who were present, requested that they might have an opportunity, on the following sabbath, of hearing the same truths enforced. Many of the Jews, also, and proselytes to their religion, after the dismissal of the assembly, accompanied Paul and Barnabas, who

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in their private exhortations endeavoured to persuade them to persevere in a steadfast attachment to the Gospel. On the subsequent sabbath, the immense crowds of people who were collected excited the envious displeasure of the Jews; and accordingly they began to oppose and blaspheme the doctrine delivered. Not discouraged, however, but rather animated by the violence of these objectors, Paul declared, that, though the first offer of mercy had been tendered to them, yet upon their refusal the invitation would be given to the Gentiles. Many of the latter description rejoiced at the intimation, and, through the rich and sovereign grace of God, embraced the Christian faith. From them, likewise, the truth of God was disseminated throughout all the neighbouring country.

The success was great; but that very circumstance rendered the adversaries more furious; and a formidable host of persecutors conspired together. The result was, that Paul and his beloved associate were forcibly driven from the place. Yet, even under that severe storm, the sincere converts remained unshaken, and experienced a season of peculiar happiness. While their enemies raged and threatened, "the disciples were filled with joy, and with the Holy Ghost."

Surely that violence is not to be dreaded, how extreme soever it may be, which cannot prevent us from receiving the lively comfort of religion, and which may have a tendency to promote these very comforts in our souls. Let us "be strong, and of a good courage." Let us pray that we, like the Christians at Antioch, may be favoured with an abundant measure of inward peace and consolation from the divine Spirit, and then we shall not be moved by the vehemence and menaces of opposers. Wherever the Gospel meets with any signal success, it may be expected to produce contentions and separations among those who were intimately united. It draws forth from many persons that enmity of the heart

heart against real godliness which had been before concealed, and covered perhaps with the garb of piety. Among the persecutors were "DEVOUT" as well as "honourable women:" and frequently those who have made a show of sanctity, and been admired on that account, are the first to raise objections. Many, also, among ourselves, like those of old, are disgusted with the large congregations which generally attend the zealous preachers of the word of God. They often think and mention it as an upbraiding reproach that such assemblies consist chiefly of the poor. That which ought to be matter of rejoicing, excites envy and displeasure. Let those, however, who labour in the Gospel, be content to follow the steps of the Apostles, "by honour and dishonour, by evil report and good report: as deceivers, and yet true *."

Paul and Barnabas departed from Antioch, and upon quitting the place shook off the dust of their feet, as a testimony against the unbelieving inhabitants, agreeably to the directions of Jesus to his disciples †. Thence they proceeded to Iconium, and there opened their message with remarkable success ‡. In that city they continued for a considerable time, and with great courage declared the truth of God, which He was pleased to confirm by various miracles, and to make effectual to the conversion of many persons. But a furious opposition was raised against them, exactly similar to what they experienced at Antioch. They had numerous friends among the people; but others calumniated their characters and doctrine, and endeavoured to draw the public odium upon them. A party was formed, and a scheme laid, in which the men of chief power were engaged to harass and by violent death destroy these new preachers. They, however, being apprized of the design, made their escape to Lystra, and both there and throughout the neighbourhood, notwithstanding their past and the prospect of fresh dangers,

* 2 Cor. vi. 8. † Mark vi. 11. ‡ Acts xiv. 1, &c.

laboured

laboured with unremitting ardour for the propagation of the Gospel.

At Lystra a poor cripple, who had been lame from his birth, received an instantaneous cure by the word of St. Paul. The miracle, being openly performed, excited general attention. But such was the blindness and wretched stupidity of the people, that, instead of desiring to be instructed by these eminent teachers, they began to deify them, and actually prepared for them idolatrous sacrifices. With wild vociferations they cried out, "The gods are come down to us in the likeness of men." Barnabas they called Jupiter, as being of the most stately appearance; and Paul obtained the title of Mercury, because he was the principal speaker.

This circumstance could not but greatly distress them, who sought no vain applause, and wished to direct the regard of all to their Lord and Master. They were struck with horror at the offer of divine honours, and doubtless felt more pain on that account than for their severest persecutions. They rent their clothes in abhorrence of the profaneness, ran among the multitude with peculiar eagerness, reproved them for their folly in worshipping men of the same infirmities with themselves, and exhorted them to turn from such senseless practices to the service of the living God, the Creator and Preserver of heaven and earth. This bold and animated address was scarcely sufficient to divert them from their purpose. It appears, then, that these primitive assertors of the Christian faith were not actuated by selfish views or worldly expectations: they could and did declare, with the greatest sincerity, "We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord *." God forbid that any, who sustain the ministerial office, should aim at their own exaltation, or be pleased with the flattering speeches and admiration of their hearers! They should desire to obtain the approbation of their fellow-creatures no further than as it may give them an opportunity

* 2 Cor. iy. 5.

of recommending the Saviour. Being chiefly concerned for his glory, they will be grieved when He is overlooked, and they themselves are extravagantly praised.

Popular favour is a poor acquisition: "it is a vapour that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away*." The people at Lystra, who had proposed to worship St. Paul as a deity, being soon afterwards prejudiced by the objections of certain furious persecutors from Antioch and Iconium, rose up with violence against him, and stoned him. They then dragged him out of the city, with marks of extreme contempt, and left him as one dead. Here, therefore, the history of our Apostle was, to all human appearance, concluded. But the Lord God, who designed him for more extensive usefulness in the church, interposed for his deliverance. He suddenly and miraculously restored him to his former strength, and the Apostle, undismayed by his enemies, returned to the city, and the next day travelled with Barnabas to Derbe. It were easy for the Lord to rescue his servants from every danger and distress. Let us learn to commit ourselves cheerfully to his disposal, desirous only, whatever events may await us, that "Christ may be magnified in our body, whether it be by life or by death †."

At Derbe they preached with vigour and success, and there finished their progress for that time, advancing no further into the country. They went back by the same road, and again visited the places in which they had met with such violent opposition. Trusting in divine Providence, they dreaded no consequences to themselves, and they were solicitous to confirm and comfort those who had received by their ministry the good word of God. They exhorted the disciples, therefore, throughout that region, to maintain their Christian profession under all their afflictions, and reminded them that God has appointed his people to pass through many trials in the road to his

* James iv. 14.

† Phil. i. 20.

kingdom.

kingdom. At the several towns where churches were gathered, they ordained ministers over them for their spiritual guidance, and solemnly commended them all to the care and protection of the Lord Christ. Much regard is due to young converts, and much pains should be used to establish them in their holy calling, that they may not, by any temptations, be moved away from the hope of the Gospel. O be encouraged to persevere through all opposition, and "hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown*!" Be not unwilling to suffer: the cross must be your present portion; it is your duty to bear it cheerfully, in the expectation of receiving "the crown of life."

At length these indefatigable labourers returned to Antioch in Syria, from which place they had first set out on their important expedition. There they fixed their abode for some time, that they might enjoy the society of the faithful, and to them they recounted the various instances of support and success with which they had been favoured in their ministry among the Gentiles. Shall not we also cultivate an intercourse with those who know and love the Lord? And, when admitted to their friendship, shall we not embrace the opportunity of declaring, or inquiring after, the enlargement of the church? Hath God "opened the door of faith" to those who were in darkness? Let this be proclaimed with grateful adoration: for no information can be more interesting or delightful. Compared with this, how trifling and foolish are the subjects which generally occupy conversation! How grievous is the stupidity of men, who, though eager to hear or relate every idle occurrence, have no desire to be acquainted with the glorious work which God is carrying on by the Gospel of his Son!

A. D. St. Paul and his companion were now called
52. to different trials, not to contend with furious adversaries, but to oppose and correct some dangerous mistakes among the brethren. A dissension arose, in consequence of certain Jewish zealots main-

* Rev. iii. 11.

taining

taining that circumcision and the observance of the ceremonial law were absolutely necessary for the salvation of Gentile believers*. Our Apostle considered the sentiment as a destructive error, subverting the very foundation of the Gospel, and set himself to resist it with great firmness. It implied that the obedience and sacrifice of Christ are not a sufficient ground of dependence towards God; that we cannot be completely justified by faith alone, however sincere; and that our own qualifications or performances have a share, at least, in procuring our favourable acceptance.

We might have thought that positions so directly contrary to the fundamental principles of the Christian system would have gained no credit. But many were staggered; and therefore, from a desire of satisfying their consciences, and restoring the peace of the church, it was agreed that Paul and Barnabas should go to Jerusalem, and take the opinion of the Apostles and elders upon the subject †. Accordingly a solemn council was there held, and the matter seriously discussed. A full account of the work of God among the Gentiles was given; and it was decided that real believers among the uncircumcised should not be required to conform to the Mosaic rites, but be considered as complete in Christ Jesus. With this decree the ambassadors returned to Antioch; and their intelligence produced great joy among the disciples. For that time the dispute was settled; but it broke out afterwards in other places, as appears from several of St. Paul's epistles, especially from that to the Galatians.

Erroneous doctrines of a like dangerous tendency are propagated in the present day. Circumcision indeed is not insisted on; but, as if the merit of the

* Acts xv. 1, &c.

† It is supposed that the Apostle refers to this journey when he says that he "went up by revelation." Doubtless he then acted under the influence of the Spirit, and the consultation was overruled for the clearer understanding and more explicit declaration of the Gospel. Gal. ii. 1-10.

Saviour

Saviour were not sufficient for our justification, it is maintained that our own obedience must, in part at least, recommend us to God. Satan is ever labouring to divide the church, and corrupt the minds of its members "from the simplicity that is in Christ*." He is the father of lies, and it is his grand artifice to spread false opinions. It is remarkable that the unscriptural sentiments advanced in modern times made their appearance very early; and were permitted to do so, that they might receive a full confutation from the Apostles themselves. Let us beware of the subtle devices of our adversary; and, in order the more successfully to resist him, let us study the divine oracles, which will furnish us with weapons of defence against all the attacks of error.

During St. Paul's continuance at Antioch, he had occasion to speak in language of sharp reprehension to St. Peter, who visited the place, and withdrew from the Gentile converts through a fear of displeasing the Jews †. Paul stood forth as a bold advocate for the liberty of the Gospel, maintaining that the Gentiles, who were turned to God by faith, were as secure, through the grace of the Saviour, as the Jews themselves. It was a painful task to reprove a beloved brother; but, where the purity of God's truth is likely to suffer, we should make no compliances, nor show any partialities; we should earnestly contend for the honour of the Gospel, even against our dearest friends.

The church at Antioch enjoyed the society and the labours of St. Paul for some time. But being eager to extend his usefulness, and confirm the disciples at a distance, he proposed to Barnabas that they should again visit the people to whom they had preached, and inquire into their state. The scheme was readily agreed to; and yet it gave occasion to a warm contention, which issued in a separation of these two affectionate companions. We contemplate this circumstance with wonder and grief. But, when we

* 2 Cor. xi. 3.

† Gal. ii. 11, &c.

perceive

perceive the evident signs of wrong tempers in persons so confessedly eminent, we should learn to place no confidence in the most exalted of human characters, and to keep our own hearts with diligence and care. The cause of the difference appears trifling; but there is nothing, however inconsiderable, which may not excite and draw forth some latent corruption of the mind: nay, probably, we are most liable to fall by the smallest temptations; for these do not awaken our fears, or compel us to stand upon our guard.

Barnabas was attached to his nephew John Mark, and desirous that he should be received again as their associate. Paul stated the impropriety of taking with them such an attendant as had shamefully deserted them on a former occasion. Each of the disputants might urge various reasons, and, possibly, both were influenced by right motives. But we pretend not to justify every thing even in the Apostles. They were men, and sometimes openly betrayed that depravity which they continually lamented in secret. In the present case, we apprehend, the two parties felt a blamable warmth of temper. O let us watch, and, remembering what is in our hearts, always suspect some danger nigh! We are exposed in the company of dearest friends, as well as in that of our most decided enemies.

But we admire the overruling providence of God, which in various ways brings good out of evil. This very disagreement became the means of enlarging the church, and promoting the salvation of many souls. The two preachers, who went different roads, carried the message of the Gospel to different quarters. Though parted from each other, they still continued to publish it to an ignorant and unbelieving world; and their temporary division became the cause of its more speedy and extensive propagation. It appears, also, that, whatever resentment might be felt at the time, a perfect reconciliation was soon effected. Paul himself afterwards spoke in the
highest

highest terms, not only of his beloved Barnabas, but of Mark also, whom he received as his assistant*. Christians may be seduced from the path of duty, but their sincerity will be evinced by their recovery.

The example before us does not afford any just encouragement of sin; it furnishes the strongest arguments for holiness. Well may we blush, and hide our faces in the dust, upon a comparison of ourselves with St. Paul. Do we not perceive in him an excellence of character of which we are destitute? If it was right for him to labour with such unwearied assiduity, to spend and be spent in the service of Christ, shall we think ourselves at liberty to lead an unprofitable and a sensual life, to take our ease, eat, drink, and be merry? No: we must be conformed to the spirit of the Apostles and primitive believers, and learn, like them, to "deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, and live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world, looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God, and our Saviour Jesus Christ †."

* 1 Cor. ix. 6. Col. iv. 10. 2 Tim. iv. 11. † Titus ii. 12, 13.

SAINT PAUL.

SECT. 3.

Paul circumcised Timothy at Lystra—came to Troas—thence to Phalippi, where Lydia and the gaoler were converted—proceeded to Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth—visited Jerusalem, and then returned, confirming the churches.

THOUGH Christians are indebted to the grace of God for every particle of excellence which they possess, the effects of this grace are not equally conspicuous in them all. Frequently they, whose former spirit and conduct have been most opposite to the Gospel, shine with peculiar lustre after conversion. A larger experience of their own folly and perverseness renders them more humble and watchful: a stronger sense of their vast obligations to God, for pardoning and subduing their iniquities, excites them to more lively and vigorous exertions in their holy profession. Such was the great Apostle whose character we are contemplating. It is not spoken to the disparagement of other believers when it is asserted that we have known none more eminent in every Christian disposition and practice than St. Paul: nor was it the language of vain confidence or presumption when he said of himself, "In nothing am I behind the very chiefest Apostles*." Being constrained to mention his own case, he expressed an earnest desire that the praise of all his attainments and usefulness might be ascribed to God alone. He declared "By the grace of God I am what I am:

* 2 Cor. xii. 11.

and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain: but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me*." May the consideration of his example rouse and animate our dull and inactive minds; and may the same blessed Spirit, which wrought effectually in him, enable us, also, to "adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things!"

A. D. Upon his separation from Barnabas, having chosen Silas as his companion, he departed from Antioch with the prayers and benedictions of the church, and travelled through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the faith of the disciples †. When he came to Lystra, he met with Timothy, a pious and amiable youth, who afterwards attained considerable eminence ‡. St. Paul being desirous of taking him as an associate in his further progress, and setting him apart for the work of the ministry, judged it expedient that he should submit to the rite of circumcision. The performance of this ceremony was, in itself, a matter of indifference, but might in the present instance prevent some objections against them and their doctrine. Notwithstanding the liberty allowed to the Gentiles, it was still generally thought that all persons of Jewish extraction should conform to the Mosaic law. Now as the mother of Timothy was a Jewess (though his father was a Greek) it seemed probable that his case would be narrowly observed, and that, if circumcision were omitted, he would be unacceptable to the Jews, and Paul's intimacy with him give them great offence.

The conduct of the Apostle on another occasion was very different, and has excited some surprise. He firmly opposed the circumcision of Titus; evidently because it was insisted on as necessary to salvation, though Titus was a Gentile. On this ground Paul would not consent to it, lest the doctrine of justification by faith in Jesus Christ should appear to be denied or renounced §. He had the largest views

* 1 Cor. xv. 10. † Acts xv. 40, 41. ‡ xvi. 1, &c. § Gal. ii. 3—5.

of Christian liberty, and was a zealous advocate for it; yet, in order to recommend the truth which he preached, he was willing to conform to the prejudices of others in matters not essential. The case of Timothy was one instance out of several in which "unto the Jews he became as a Jew, that he might gain the Jews*." We admire his meekness, self-denial, and disinterested regard to the credit and advancement of the Gospel. Such compliances are truly honourable, and may greatly add to a person's usefulness in the world. But let us take heed lest we pervert this example, by making concessions clearly sinful or of a dangerous tendency, or by yielding, even in things lawful, through covetousness or ambition.

While Paul and his beloved companions travelled from place to place, and scattered the good seed, they saw the blessed fruits of their labours. Under their care the churches daily increased in numbers, and became more and more established in the faith. These messengers of Heaven were guided in their various removals, as well as in their preaching, by the immediate direction of the Holy Spirit. They opened their embassy in one district, where they were received as the angels of God †, but were forbidden to do it in another, at least for a season. Having traversed a large part of Asia, and arrived at Troas, they collected, from a vision in the night, that they were called to cross the water into Europe, and preach the Gospel in Macedonia. They obeyed without reluctance or delay, being prepared to pass over lands or seas, wherever the Lord should mark out their course.

The first town of note to which they came was Philippi; and, during their continuance there, some occurrences happened which demand particular attention. The sacred historian minutely records the conversion of an individual, which proved the beginning of a large and prosperous church. On the sab-

* 1 Cor. ix. 20—23. See also Acts xxi. 21—24. † Gal. iv. 14, 15.
bath-day

bath-day they took the opportunity of addressing certain women, assembled together in a place set apart for prayer. Many, it should seem, were present, but we read only of one person, named Lydia, who received real advantage. She listened with eagerness: "The Lord opened her heart." This favourable disposition is, indeed, accounted for; but let us mark its influence and blessing. Immediately she felt the efficacy of the Gospel; both she and her family were baptized, and her house was opened for the accommodation of those who had brought her the glad tidings of salvation. Ah! why is it that others refuse even an attentive hearing? Because ignorance, prejudice, pride, and sensuality, render us all averse to such subjects. Our minds are, as it were, closed against the truth of God, and resist its admission. O let us pray that the Lord would remove the obstruction, and open our hearts! Thus only will the doctrine of Christ find a ready entrance, and make a lasting impression.

How various are the methods of grace! Lydia, probably, was wrought upon in a gentle manner, without any strong terrors or violent emotions. But we proceed to consider another conversion of a different sort, and one in which the hand of God was more visibly exerted. Some singular circumstances which preceded were evidently ordered by the divine Providence with a view to this event.

A certain damsel at Philippi, under a demoniacal possession, pretending to a power of divination, bore a public and repeated testimony to St. Paul and his associates, as the servants of the most high God, and teachers of the only way of salvation. The multitude might imagine from such an attestation that she was in league with the preachers of the Gospel, and that they were all impostors of the same kind, equally deserving of neglect and contempt. That there might be no ground, however, for the suspicion, the Apostle commanded the evil spirit to depart. The damsel was a slave, and her owners had reaped large pecuniary

cuniary advantages from her magical art. They now found that their gain was at an end, and with great indignation dragged Paul and Silas before the magistrates of the city, accusing them of sedition. Thus it frequently happens that interested persons, whose dishonest profits are likely to suffer, bitterly inveigh against the zealous preachers and professors of our holy religion, and charge upon them that very disturbance of which they themselves are the authors. By slanderous reproaches and malicious calumnies Satan and his agents may so far prevail as to bring the faithful servants of God into temporary danger and distress.

The populace rose up with fury against these ambassadors of Christ. The magistrates themselves treated them most injuriously, condemned them without any fair examination, tore off their clothes, caused them to be scourged with many stripes, cast them into prison, and left them in the hands of an austere and inhuman gaoler. He, too, as if he were glad of his commission, thrust them into one of the closest cells, and secured their feet in the stocks. Yet, behold the situation and conduct of the servants of God! Where distress and dejection are usual, there we find them maintaining their wonted reliance on His power; where the heart of the stoutest commonly fails and is afraid, there they are rejoicing, and at peace. The darkness and horrors of the dungeon could not exclude the light of God's countenance: though their wounded bodies suffered sharp anguish, divine consolations flowed in upon their minds. At midnight they were heard to pray aloud, and to sing hymns of praise. Their case, then, may encourage us to "commit the keeping of our souls to God in well-doing," whatever dangers may threaten us. "In the fear of the Lord is strong confidence; and his children shall have a place of refuge*." They possess a never-failing source of peace and joy, of which they cannot be deprived by stripes, chains, and tortures.

* Prov. xiv. 26.

It soon appeared that this painful dispensation was appointed to accomplish the most gracious designs. The Lord interposed for the vindication and deliverance of his oppressed servants. While they were engaged in exercises of devotion, the earth trembled, the prison was shaken to its foundation, the doors thrown open, and all the fetters of the prisoners instantly broken. In this awful scene our attention is chiefly directed to the gaoler. Alarmed and terrified, under an apprehension that all the persons committed to him had escaped, he was about to despatch himself with his own sword. Paul, however, knowing his purpose, happily diverted him from it: yet the alarm given to his spirits did not end here. Upon hearing the voice of the Apostle, the stout-hearted sinner, overwhelmed with fear and consternation, ran in, fell down at the feet of the very men whom he had so lately treated with insult and cruelty, and cried out, in deep concern for his soul, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Astonishing change indeed, accomplished by no less a power than that which produced the miraculous convulsion of the earth!

Paul and Silas could not but listen to his words with peculiar delight. They were ready to instruct the inquiring penitent, and, forgetting their own stripes, were most eager to heal his wounded conscience. Immediately they preached Christ to him and his family, assuring them that on their believing they should obtain salvation. The effect was wonderful. The gaoler was converted, and, while by faith he committed himself to Jesus, divine peace and joy sprang up in his heart. How different, also, his outward behaviour, as well as his inward affections! He brought out Paul and Silas from their confinement, washed their lacerated bodies, and gave them food for their refreshment: both he and his domestics were baptized, and probably his house became a church for God. Thus the violent opposition eventually promoted "the furtherance of the Gospel." O why should you fear, if you are engaged in the cause

of God and his truth? But, if you are fighting against Him, you cannot possibly prevail, however strong may be your party, however subtle and profound your schemes.

In the morning, the magistrates, probably terrified by the earthquake, ordered the prisoners to be dismissed. But Paul, with the confidence of an upright man, remonstrated against the injurious treatment they had received, and observed that as Roman citizens they were entitled to peculiar privileges, and might demand satisfaction. After this bold representation they obtained a proper concession from the officers, and an honourable discharge. They did not rigorously insist on their rights, but showed that they were men of peace; for, as soon as they had visited and comforted the brethren, they quitted the town, lest further tumult and disturbance should be excited. Such was the first planting of the church at Philippi, of which the most favourable testimony is given in the sacred records: and from such small beginnings, under the blessing of our God, works of extensive usefulness often take their rise.

Not discouraged by the violence they had met with, our Apostle and his associates pressed on to other services. Having passed through some considerable cities in Macedonia, they came to Thessalonica, a place of peculiar note*. There also, according to his custom, St. Paul resorted to the synagogue of the Jews, addressed his countrymen on the grand topics of the Gospel, and proved, from their own Scriptures, that Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah. Nor did he speak in vain; many believed his report, and joined his company. But others soon discovered a different spirit. The Jews, who rejected his word, raised a violent and furious opposition; they collected certain low and profligate fellows, and threw the whole town into commotion. The house where Paul lodged was assaulted; and, though he escaped, Jason, who was his host, and some of the brethren, were

* Acts xvii. 1, &c.

dragged

dragged before the magistrates, and accused as persons disaffected to the government, and as general disturbers of the peace, who "had turned the world upside down." The prosecution, indeed, was dropped, but it became necessary for Paul and Silas to fly from the place under cover of the night.

It may be asked, Is this the pure doctrine of Jesus Christ, which is every where spoken against, which causes divisions and animosities in families, towns, and neighbourhoods? Can that system which breathes nothing but benevolence, and is calculated to promote universal happiness, be liable to such objections, and produce such consequences? Yes, these are the very calumnies, these the effects, which we are taught will usually attend the faithful declaration of the Gospel: but they are to be ascribed to the perverseness of its opposers, and not to the nature or tendency of its principles. We ought not, therefore, to be staggered in our belief or profession of the truth. Shall the ministers of Christ dread the resentment of the world? There is a way to avoid it; there is a method of preaching which gives no disturbance. But is this the scheme you would recommend? Would you have them accommodate their message to men's vitiated taste, and say "Peace, peace, when there is no peace?" Then, indeed, there might be no persecution: but the prospect hereafter would be tremendous; the deceived and the deceiver would perish together*.

St. Paul did not continue long at Thessalonica; but the fruits of his labours were glorious and lasting. His two epistles to the church in that place evidently show that the Gospel prevailed and triumphed in the midst of opposition. He speaks of the Christians there in higher terms than of any other society. He thus writes: "Our Gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance: having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost, ye

* Matt. xv. 14.

were

were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia *." How are the hands of ministers strengthened, and their hearts comforted, when they can give such an account of the people under their charge!

His letters, likewise, prove how great was his tenderness among the Thessalonians, how strong his affection for them, how irreproachable his conduct. It should seem that with difficulty he procured common provisions; or that he refused the offers of support from his friends, for the sake of recommending the Gospel by his disinterested spirit, and exhibiting a pattern of diligence. "He did not eat any man's bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail NIGHT AND DAY, that he might not be chargeable to any of them †." Sometimes he received relief from the Philippians: but this he neither sought nor desired ‡. What an example of generosity, patience, and self-denial, springing from the most exalted motives! Such were the lessons which our Apostle had learned at the feet of Jesus §. Are we thus instructed? What have we been enabled to do, or relinquish, or endure, in the service of Christ? Justly may we be ashamed to mention our own difficulties, when we read those of St. Paul.

After his departure from Thessalonica, he fled to the neighbouring city of Berea, and there also opened his commission in the synagogue of the Jews. The appearances were pleasing: the people discovered a much nobler disposition than the Thessalonians. They were willing to hear, and with great diligence and seriousness compared the Apostle's doctrines with the Scriptures: nor do we wonder that many embraced the Christian faith. It challenges and deserves inquiry, and to the humble and teachable, as it promises, so it communicates knowledge and happiness. Those who reject it are generally too indolent or too bigoted to give it a fair examination: and

* 1 Thess. i. 5-7. † 2 Thess. iii. 8. ‡ Phil. iv. 16, 17.

§ 11, 12.

yet,

yet, with much arrogance, they call themselves free-thinkers.

But the labours of St. Paul were soon closed at Berea. He was followed by the storm which had been raised at Thessalonica. The Jews pursued him with indignation, and stirred up a violent commotion. It therefore became necessary for him once more to consult his safety by flight; though Silas and Timothy, as being less obnoxious, ventured to continue there for a time, that they might carry on the work of God. Thus the opposition, as before, contributed to a more extensive propagation of the Gospel, and Satan defeated his own purpose. The unbelief and resistance of some were the means of sending salvation to many others.

Paul was conducted to Athens, a city the most celebrated for the study of philosophy and all polite literature. But, even here, profound ignorance of God, and stupid idolatries, prevailed, evidently proving the Apostle's assertion, that "the world by wisdom knew not God *." His mind was deeply affected by viewing the gross superstitions of men who boasted of their superior discernment. Though he possessed a fine taste and improved understanding, he attended not to the learned curiosities and disputations of the place, which as a scholar he might have relished. But he felt a strong desire to correct the fatal errors universally received, and to diffuse the knowledge of his God and Saviour. To this end he bore his testimony in various parts of that renowned city. His sentiments, however, suited not the notions of proud philosophers. They despised him as a trifling contemptible fellow, a mere babbler, who had nothing to offer deserving of their notice. Others represented him as an advocate for certain foreign deities when he preached Jesus and the resurrection. He was therefore summoned to answer for himself, and give an account of his doctrine

* 1 Cor. i. 21.

before

before the high court, which assembled on the famous hill of Areopagus.

In such a formidable situation our Apostle stood forth to declare the grand principles of true religion. His address upon that occasion was masterly, and admirably adapted to the circumstances and character of the audience. He began with an observation on their uncommon attention to the worship of invisible beings, and said that, in his view of their devotional rites, he had particularly remarked an altar inscribed "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD." While they, therefore, evidently confessed their ignorance, he avowed himself ready to give them instructions in this important subject. He then insisted on some of the perfections of that God whom they knew not, the God of creation and the God of providence; and proved, by an appeal to his works and to the confessions of their own poets, that he is the Maker, Supporter, and Governor, of the world. From these principles he argued with great strength against their idolatrous notions and practices. He affirmed that this God had long borne with the folly of men, and suffered them to follow their own devices: but that repentance was now universally and indispensably required by the authority of Heaven. He further enforced the duty by the awful consideration of a day of future retribution and general judgment, of which, he declared, the Lord God had given an assurance by the resurrection of the Saviour from the dead.

There was a peculiar wisdom and dignity in the Apostle's address: but it should seem that his audience interrupted him just as he was entering on the most important topics. Conceited of their own erudition, they refused him a serious and patient hearing, and, as it frequently happens, rejected with a contemptuous sneer what they could not confute. Though many, however, made light of his doctrine, there were some who believed and showed a strong attachment

attachment to him, and of these one or two of considerable rank.

It is supposed that there was scarcely any place in which St. Paul met with so little success as in this celebrated city, among these accomplished scholars and acute philosophers. Justly may we cry out, "Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world *?" In other ages and countries, many persons, admired for their sagacity and superior attainments in learning, have been among the bitterest opposers of the Gospel. And no wonder, since this system strikes at the root of our pride, and can find admission with those only who are willing to become fools, that they may be wise †. It is no argument against Christianity that it was rejected by these vain pretenders to science at Athens: nay, their rejection of it can be readily explained. But it is a strong evidence in its favour that Paul was not afraid to propose and maintain it in such a philosophic city, and that some were brought over to his side.

Let us inquire, who among ourselves have cordially submitted to the faith of Christ? It is worthy of the acceptance of the highest ranks: but if you who fill an exalted place in society are disposed to embrace the Gospel, like Dionysius and Damaris at Athens, how great are your obligations to that God who has removed your prejudice and subdued your pride! Are there not some, who, with a show of wisdom, are obliged to confess that they worship an unknown God? We entreat you to listen to those who would declare him unto you. Your past times have been "times of ignorance," notwithstanding a superstitious performance of the formalities of devotion. O praise the Lord, who has been patient and long-suffering towards you; and now hear his voice, for he calleth you to repentance! We remind you of the final advent of the Saviour, and the solemnities of the universal

* 1 Cor. i. 20.

† iii. 19.

judgment. These things are too important to be dismissed with a sneer. Consider them with fixed attention: believe, and be saved.

From Athens our Apostle proceeded to Corinth *. This large and flourishing city, which abounded in wealth and magnificence, was infamous even to a proverb for its general spirit of dissipation. It might seem, therefore, an unlikely place for the reception of the Gospel: but the ministers of Christ must "preach to every creature," depending upon God to make his own word effectual. When he is pleased to send it forth as "the rod of his strength †," it accomplishes great events. It is "mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds ‡." At Corinth a numerous society of Christians was gathered, as we may learn from the two epistles addressed to that church; and some of these had once been of an abandoned character.

Here he met with two pious persons, Aquila and his wife Priscilla, who had lately been banished from Rome for their religion. With them he took up his abode, and laboured for his support as a tent-maker; for they had all been instructed in the same occupation. At first, probably, this attention to his trade was absolutely necessary; and afterwards he thought it expedient, that he might prevent or remove prejudices and objections, and prove that he sought not his own ease or interest §. His grand aim was to spread the knowledge of divine truth, and to "win souls." On every sabbath he stood forth in the Jewish synagogue as an advocate for the Gospel. Especially when Silas and Timothy came to him from Macedonia, and enlivened him by their presence and good account of the churches, he felt a peculiar earnestness of spirit for the honour of his Master, and preached with fresh vigour. The Jews rejected his testimony, and blasphemed the Lord Christ, whom he commended to their regard. He, therefore, solemnly

* Acts xviii. 1, &c. † Psal. cx. 2. ‡ 2 Cor. x. 4.

§ 1 Cor. ix. 12-19. 2 Cor. xi. 7-12.

warned

warned them of their condemnation, charged their destruction upon their own heads, and then turned from them to the Gentiles. He no more renewed his instructions in their synagogue, but, from that time, addressed the people, who were disposed to hear him, at the house of one Justus, in the neighbourhood.

His labours were not ineffectual. Crispus, a man of some rank as being "the ruler of the synagogue," and many of the Corinthians also, came forth and made profession of the Christian faith. Yet it was a season of distress with the Apostle; and it should seem that he gave way to an improper dejection of mind. He declares that he had been with them "in weakness and in fear, and in much trembling *." A view of the prevailing wickedness in that opulent city, a sense of his own infirmities, the contempt with which both he and his doctrine were treated, and an apprehension of danger, combined probably to discourage him; and it appears as if he was ready to take his flight, or decline his work. At that juncture the Lord graciously interposed, commanded him to persist in his service with diligence and intrepidity, and promised him the divine presence, protection from enemies, and great success in his ministry among the Corinthians. He thus addressed him in a vision of the night, "Be not afraid, but speak, and hold set on thee to hurt thee: for I am with thee, and no man shall set on thee to hurt thee: for I have much people in this place."

St. Paul was emboldened, by this assurance from Heaven, to continue at Corinth a year and six months, during which time he laboured in the Gospel with much assiduity, and to good effect. There also he wrote his Epistles to the Thessalonians; and, as some think, that to the Galatians. They were probably the first of his compositions now remaining. He forgot not the concerns of his distant brethren, but felt a painful anxiety for them, when he heard of

* 1 Cor. ii. 3.

certain

certain instances of misconduct and declension in the churches.

The faithful ambassadors of Christ may be instructed from the example before us. It is nothing wonderful that they, like this eminent Apostle, should be oppressed and discouraged by inward temptations as well as outward opposition. O, let us not increase their difficulties by our contempt or unkindness! Rather let us strengthen their hands in God by our cordial reception of the truth, and pray for them, that they may be upheld and assisted in the vigorous prosecution of their important work. May much people be turned to the Lord, through their labours, in those very places which they consider as most hopeless! *In this they may be confident and rejoice, that, wherever their Master has appointed them a service, He will continue and support them; nor shall any violence of their enemies prevent or retard the purposes of his mercy.*

At length a severe storm arose at Corinth. The Jews were indignant: they seized the Apostle, and in an outrageous manner brought him before the tribunal of Gallio, the governor or proconsul of Achaia. They accused him of introducing a new religion, to the subversion of the law; but their accusation was rejected, and his defence forbidden with equal contempt and disregard of both. Gallio would hear nothing on the subject, and therefore instantly dismissed the parties. He considered the Jews and their law, the Apostle and his Gospel, as beneath his notice: they were left to settle, as they chose, what was to him a frivolous contention: "he cared for none of those things."

St. Paul remained there some time longer, notwithstanding this strong opposition. It was not the mere clamour of enemies which could accelerate his departure. When the time came, he took with him his two friends, Aquila and Priscilla: and it is remarked that at Cenchrea, a neighbouring port, from which he

set

set sail, he shaved his head in consequence of a certain vow he had made, probably for a great deliverance. When they arrived at Ephesus, he preached the word with his accustomed zeal, but soon left his dear companions there, though they earnestly requested him to continue. He "conferred not with flesh and blood," pressing on with unremitting ardour wherever his duty called him. He hastened to Jerusalem, with charitable contributions for the church; and, having finished the purpose of his journey, he called at Antioch upon his return, and made some stay in that place. He then passed in a regular progress throughout the country of Galatia and Phrygia, with a view of propagating the Gospel yet more extensively, and encouraging believers under all their trials and distresses.

How honourable the employment of the Apostle! Happy those who enjoyed the benefit and knew the value of his labours! What a glory and excellency distinguished his character while he travelled from one kingdom to another, "to turn men from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God *;" "as poor, yet making many rich †!" Instead of complaining of his arduous post, he was constrained to utter that grateful acknowledgment, "Thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place ‡!"

Here again we pause, and ask, Will any maintain that Paul could be a deceiver? Could all these astonishing events, so exactly similar, which his preaching produced in different parts of the world, be the effect of mere fancy or delusion? Let infidels credit this if they can. They will not, indeed, hesitate to admit any absurdities or impossibilities, rather than allow that our religion is a revelation from Heaven. But let us rejoice in the truth and efficacious influence of the Gospel; "for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth §." Let us

* Acts xxvi. 18. † 2 Cor. vi. 10. ‡ ii. 14. § Rom. i. 16.

not be satisfied with granting the sincerity, or even admiring the excellence, of the Apostle. Do we receive the doctrine which he propagated? Does it regulate our faith and practice? We are not so much in danger of openly rejecting the whole system, as of trifling under an external profession, without experiencing "the power of godliness." O, let us be afraid, lest the word which we hear, and pretend to believe, should rise up to condemn us in the judgment!

The Lord God set his seal to the declarations of his Apostle; and we do not hesitate to assert that He continues to this day, in a most decided manner, to prosper the labours of those who deliver the same testimony. Similar effects attend the promulgation of the simple and unadulterated Gospel. Many, like the Thessalonians, are hereby "turned to God from idols, to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven *." Let us offer up our fervent prayers that we may see more evident proofs among ourselves of a divine energy accompanying the preaching of the cross. We have many precious promises, which should encourage our expectations of glorious events. Let those who "have this ministry, as they have received mercy, faint not †," but be unwearied in their exertions for the enlargement and prosperity of the church. May they be honoured of God, whom they serve in the Gospel of his Son, "by turning many to righteousness," and then "shine as the stars for ever and ever ‡!" Amen.

* 1 Thess. i. 9, 10.

† 2 Cor. iv. 1.

‡ Dan. xii. 3.

SAINT PAUL.

SECT. 4.

Paul came to Ephesus—was driven away by a tumult of the people—visited Greece—returned to Troas—raised Eutychus to life—passed on to Miletus—there sent for the elders from Ephesus, and took his leave—at Tyre and Cesarea was dissuaded from going to Jerusalem, but proceeded thither—complied with Jewish prejudices—assaulted by a mob—taken into custody of the Romans—addressed the people, but furiously opposed—arraigned before the sanhedrim.

THE page of history has celebrated the characters of many who showed uncommon ardour in spreading devastation and misery whilst they passed from kingdom to kingdom. Such were Alexander and Cæsar; who, however illustrious their names have appeared, were no other than the oppressors and murderers of mankind. How different the Apostle of Christ! His wisdom, zeal, and courage, were superior to those of the most admired heroes; and the motives of his conduct were noble and excellent, but theirs sordid and base. We observe him continually planning fresh schemes, and burning with eager desire, to carry the Gospel from nation to nation, in defiance of all difficulties and dangers; and it is obvious that he was actuated, not by the prospect of temporal emolument, dominion, or any carnal gratification, but by the purest affection of which the mind is susceptible,—love to God, and to the whole human race.

From what we have already seen of the extreme violence of persecution to which St. Paul was exposed in the cause of Christ, it might be thought that he

would

would soon be discouraged, and decline all further exertions. Doubtless this would have been the case had he not been upheld by a divine support, and animated by a full conviction of the truth and excellence of those doctrines which he preached. But we shall still behold him pressing on to new services; like an undaunted conqueror, dissatisfied with former victories, and eager to subdue many more and far distant cities and kingdoms, whatever dangers or deaths might seem to obstruct his way.

A. D. We left him, after his journey to Jerusalem, ^{57.} confirming the churches of Asia. That object being accomplished, he returned to Ephesus, a place of considerable note, but extremely addicted to idolatry and sensual excesses. Here he took up his abode for some time, and by his labours a large society of Christians was formed, to whom he afterwards addressed an invaluable epistle, which is still extant.

Here he found certain disciples instructed in the doctrine and baptism of John, yet not acquainted with that abundant effusion of the Holy Spirit which had been granted as the blessed fruit and evidence of our Lord's ascension*. But, by the imposition of the Apostle's hands, the same miraculous influences were conferred on them which other churches had received. Thus a glorious attestation was given to the Gospel at Ephesus; and probably others were thereby induced to become obedient to the faith. There may be many sincere believers in a great measure ignorant of the extent of those privileges to which they are admitted in Christ Jesus. We inquire of them, as Paul of the Ephesians, "Unto what were ye baptized?" and we exhort them to pray earnestly that they may be favoured with large communications of that light, and strength, and comfort, which God hath promised, and is willing to bestow upon his people.

The Apostle opened his commission in the syna-

* Acts xix. 1, &c.

gogue of the Jews, and endeavoured for three months together, by argument and persuasion, to bring them into subjection to the kingdom of God. But such was the perverseness of that people, that at length he declined all connexion with them; and, removing from the synagogue to a public school in the city, he there continued, for the space of two years, to prosecute the great object of his ministry. During that period opportunity was given to the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, as well as to the Ephesians, to hear his testimony; and the knowledge of salvation was diffused in an extensive manner. It pleased God to confirm his doctrine by many surprising miracles; diseases were instantly removed, and evil spirits dispossessed.

Certain wandering Jews, pretending to the power of expelling demons, were desirous to imitate St. Paul, and accordingly, in their adjurations, made use of the name of Jesus. They had observed the wonders it had wrought, whilst they knew not its true efficacy, or were impelled by sinister motives to apply and pervert it. A remarkable instance of this kind occurred in the seven sons of a Jewish priest; they conspired together for the purpose, but were baffled in their scheme, and nearly destroyed by the man whom they presumptuously attempted to cure. The Lord Christ is not to be trifled with. He will not give his sanction to the devices of hypocrites, and sooner or later will detect their perfidy. It is vain, it is dangerous, for those who are strangers to his character, and live in disobedience to his authority, to profess an attachment to his person. Though they may seem to take his part, in opposition to Satan, and to plead his cause by writing or preaching in defence of the Gospel, they are not likely to succeed better than "the seven sons of Sceva." Their efforts, probably, will not avail for the deliverance of others, and will certainly turn to their own confusion.

The defeat of these arrogant pretenders to a connexion with the Saviour engaged the public notice at Ephesus,

Ephesus, and stamped greater credit upon the Gospel and the ministry of the Apostle. Men were struck with an awful regard for the Lord Jesus, and afraid of provoking him by dissimulation. Convinced of the sinfulness of their magical arts, they burned those very books from which they had derived their former gains, and which they might then have sold for an immense sum. This was done in the open view of the town; and it is remarked as an evidence of the glorious efficacy and triumphant success of the Gospel. It is, indeed, "mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds *." Where its power is felt, every profane practice will be renounced, and even the love of money will be subdued. *Have we given such a proof of our submission to Christ? Are we willing to forsake those occupations and habits, though most profitable, which cannot be retained with a good conscience? Ah! how many reject the word of God, and perish eternally, because they are determined to hold fast their unjust gains! "Fifty thousand pieces of silver," and the accustomed means of subsistence, were sacrificed by these Ephesians: let those who are attached to the world say if that principle be not most potent which can produce such uncommon effects.*

During St. Paul's abode at Ephesus, he was not unmindful of his friends and brethren at a distance. He meditated fresh services in other places, and burned with an eager desire not only to visit the churches, which were far separated from each other, but to carry the glad tidings of salvation even to Rome, the metropolis of the world. For the present, since he prolonged his stay, he sent as his substitutes into Macedonia two of his beloved companions, Timothy and Erastus. About this time probably he wrote his first epistle to the Corinthians, in which he mentions his situation at Ephesus, as affording him opportunities of extensive usefulness, though attended with violent opposition: "A great door and

* 2 Cor. x. 4.

effectual

effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries *."

Satan may be expected to use his strongest efforts, by stirring up his zealous agents to resist the Gospel, when his kingdom is shaken, and "the pillars thereof tremble." In most places there are some persons, who, from their peculiar employments or connexions in life, suppose their interest will be injured by the progress of true religion. Their chief emoluments, and even their subsistence, may seem to depend upon the folly and wickedness of others: and therefore, when the word of God comes with power, and turns men from their evil ways, these people, perceiving their "craft is in danger to be set at nought," will raise a grievous outcry.

This was the case at Ephesus. Demetrius, who derived large profits from the idolatrous worship of Diana, stirred up a furious mob against Paul and his companions. The Apostle would have ventured into the midst of the tumult to address them on the subject; but he was prevailed on by his friends to consult his safety: and his example teaches us that a prudent regard to our own preservation is consistent with the warmest zeal.

At length the town-clerk or recorder of the city appeased the violence of the multitude, which threatened very serious consequences. He argued not on principles of religion, but, as a man whose natural discretion suggested the necessity of moderation, persuaded them through motives of interest to desist from their outrageous proceedings. We perceive the hand of God even in such events. "He stilleth the noise of the seas, and," what is equally untractable, "the tumult of the people †." His avowed enemies come forward to promote his purposes, when he is pleased to make use of them: he frequently influences those, who bear no good will to Zion, to plead the cause of his servants. Let our dependence, then, be fixed upon him, and not upon an arm of flesh.

* 1 Cor. xvi. 9, 9.

† Psal. lxx. 7.

With

With a reference, probably, to this uproar, the Apostle said, "I have fought with beasts at Ephesus *;" and again, "We were pressed out of measure above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life; but we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead †." Ah! why do we shrink from danger, while we are engaged in the work of such a Master? Let us contemplate the illustrious pattern before us, and be animated, by the view of his patience, faith, and courage, to endure to the end.

A. D. It became expedient for Paul to quit his situation at Ephesus, and therefore, having taken an affectionate leave of the disciples there, he directed his course to Macedonia ‡. Ever intent upon his work, he preached and exhorted from place to place, and thus passed on to the southern parts of Greece. In the midst of various distresses, inward as well as outward, he prosecuted his journey to Corinth: and, having spent three months in that neighbourhood, when he was prevented by a design upon his life from embarking to Syria, he returned through Macedonia, and sailed from Philippi to Troas. There he remained seven days, and on the first day of the week delivered with peculiar energy an address to the disciples, who were assembled for the celebration of the Lord's supper. It should seem, that, as he was "ready to depart on the morrow," he was induced, under the thoughts of leaving them, to protract the service to an uncommon length: "he continued his speech until midnight." The more deeply our hearts are affected with divine things, and the stronger are our impressions of the love of Christ, we shall be more eagerly desirous both to declare and hear the glorious truths of the Gospel. The men of the world may wonder and revile: but, while they devote days and weeks to the pursuit of vain pleasures, let us not think a few hours too much to be employed in spiritual exercises.

* 1 Cor. xv. 32.

† 2 Cor. i. 8, 9.

‡ Acts xx. 1, &c.

The

The Christians at Troas met in an upper room, and it is remarked by the historian that they had many lights: their religious assemblies, therefore, were not held in the dark, as some have maliciously insinuated. On the occasion now mentioned, a young man, inattentive probably to the Apostle's exhortations, was overpowered with sleep, and, falling to the ground from the window in which he sat, was taken up dead. This circumstance produced confusion and distress in the congregation, till St. Paul, having embraced the body in faith and prayer, restored it to life. We lament that there are among ourselves such numerous instances of drowsy worshippers, persons pretending, at least, to join in the divine ordinances, but so listless and stupid, that much of the short time allotted to the service seems to be slumbered away. Some may plead their infirmities or the prolixity of the preacher; but the practice is not to be justified. It betrays a want of true spiritual vigour, and a sad neglect, if not contempt, of God, which must be highly offensive to Him. Who would not be afraid of falling down dead in such a state, and where no revival, like that of Eutychus, could be expected? Who does not tremble at the thought of being thus summoned to the tribunal of Heaven?

The Apostle resumed his discourse, and was not willing to part from his dear friends till break of day. They spent the whole night in sweet communion with God and with each other. How rare an example of zeal and love! At length he left the place, and, for one stage at least, chose to travel on foot. He affected no pomp, and probably, in prosecuting his journey by himself, wished to secure some time for retirement. At Assos he joined his companions, with whom he took ship, and, having touched at different towns on the sea-coast, came to Miletus. He hastened to Jerusalem, and therefore, that he might not be detained by the tender importunities of his

his Christian brethren at Ephesus, he passed by that city. He sent, however, for the elders of their church to Miletus, and addressed himself to them in a solemn and pathetic manner, giving them his last charge, and suggesting suitable instructions for the execution of their important office.

He appealed to their knowledge and observation of his conduct for a proof of his integrity, meekness, diligence, and zeal, in the exercise of his ministry amongst them. He reminded them of the fidelity and earnestness with which he had preached, and of the grand subjects on which he had insisted, repentance and faith. He informed them that he was going, under a strong impulse of the Spirit, to Jerusalem, and, though ignorant of the event, had received positive and repeated assurances that bonds and afflictions awaited him there. Yet he declared, that, far from being staggered by the prospect, he valued not life itself, provided he could finish his course with joy, and fulfil his ministry by an extensive propagation of the Gospel.

He affirmed that they were then looking upon him for the last time, and exhorted them to consider, that, as he had delivered to them the whole Christian system without reserve, he should stand acquitted before God, whatever might become of the people for whom he had laboured, and that they must answer for their own souls. He charged them, therefore, to maintain a constant care over themselves and every part of the flock committed to them, remembering from whom they had received their appointment, and how dear to God was that church, "which He had purchased with his own blood." He warned them of false and destructive teachers, who would soon arise and excite disturbances, and pressed upon them the duty of unceasing vigilance. He then commended them all to God and to the word of his grace, expressing the most earnest desires for their spiritual advancement and final salvation, and proposed

posed for their imitation his own example of diligence, disinterestedness, self-denial, and benevolent attention to the poor.

The separation was truly affecting. Upon his bended knees he offered up his fervent supplications for them, whilst they with many tears wept over him and embraced him. We wonder not at their distress, as they were assured that they should see his face no more; no more be favoured with his ministrations, his counsels, or prayers. They accompanied him to the ship, to bid him the last farewell, and then, as it were by violence, he was torn from them.

May we not ask, Is there any thing in this address like the language of an impostor? Do we not perceive the clearest marks of an upright man, and of a messenger from Heaven? O that all the ambassadors of Christ may partake of his spirit, be less attentive to the world, and more mindful of their important office! O that, like him, they may feel a generous concern for the people of their charge, and be solicitous to feed them with the wholesome doctrines of God's word! May Jesus, their exalted Lord, endue them with all necessary wisdom, strength, and zeal, and prosper their exertions for his own glory! May he teach and enable them to "take heed unto themselves, and to all the flock!" So will they "not shun to declare all the counsel of God," and, when they close their services on earth, it will inspire them with gratitude and joy to be assured that they are "pure from the blood of all men."

Paul sailed from Miletus, and, having passed by several places, landed at Tyre, where he found some dear followers of the Saviour, and continued with them seven days*. In that city certain persons, under a prophetic impulse, warned him of danger, and entreated him not to proceed to Jerusalem. But, being confident that duty called him, he did not shrink from his purpose. Having taken a solemn leave of his friends, with whom he was not ashamed to kneel

* Acts xxi. 1, &c.

down in prayer upon the sea-shore, he pursued his journey. He stopped to pay his respects to the Christians at Ptolemais, and then advanced to Caesarea, where he was guest to Philip the Deacon and Evangelist.

There he received more express information of the difficulties which awaited him: Agabus foretold that he should be bound, imprisoned, and delivered over to the Roman power. He was therefore most earnestly desired by his companions in travel, as well as by the brethren at Caesarea, to give up his intentions of visiting Jerusalem. But, as no dangers could intimidate his mind, he would not yield to their entreaties. Had he, then, no regard for his friends? Yes; and on that account he felt a severe conflict. He was not afraid to meet perils and death; but he could not bear to see those whom he loved overwhelmed with distress. He cried out, "What mean ye to weep, and to break mine heart? for I am ready, not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." This shows that he possessed the tenderest affections, and that he determined to persevere in his purpose, only from a supreme regard to the Saviour, whom he served. The sorrowful supplicants desisted, and with humble submission referred the event to God.

Does not a sense of our indolence and timidity cover us with shame, while we contemplate St. Paul's unwearied exertions and willingness to lay down life itself in his Master's cause? Do we not value our friends, our ease, liberty, and safety, far more than the honour and favour of Christ? If his love constrain us in any measure as it did the Apostle, why do we betray so much hesitation and reluctance in pursuing the plainest path of duty, merely because certain difficulties seem to obstruct our progress?

St. Paul, then, arrived at his journey's end, and took up his abode at Jerusalem with Mnason, an old disciple. There he met with a cordial reception from the church; and, having seized the earliest opportunity

of visiting St. James, he related to him, in the presence of all the elders, how the work of God had been carried on by his ministry among the Gentiles. His account excited their gratitude and joy; but they warned him, that, glorious as his success had been, the strongest prejudices prevailed in his Jewish brethren against him. It was generally understood that he every where encouraged the Jews to neglect and forsake the Mosaic law. They advised him, therefore, with a view of silencing objectors, to join himself publicly with four persons, who were bound by a particular vow to certain ritual observances, and to submit to all the ceremonies appointed for such a purpose. The Apostle complied, not through a sinful fear, or a temporizing spirit, but in order that he might not wound any weak consciences, and, by conforming in matters merely indifferent, might gain the more to the love and service of Christ.

Such was his condescending and tender regard to the infirmities and mistakes of others. But how culpable was that hasty and uncharitable disposition by which many thousand believers were ready to take up an exception against a character so eminent and so honoured as St. Paul! Shall we wonder when we perceive something of the same vehemence and bigotry among Christians in our own day? Yet, surely, we should lament that through misconception and rash judgment they are frequently inclined to suspect and condemn each other; and we ought to beware for ourselves, lest we entertain or receive an unfavourable opinion of a brother, without just grounds.

Paul had begun to comply with the ceremonial institutions in the temple; when suddenly a violent tumult was raised by certain Jews from Asia, who with great impetuosity exclaimed against him as an enemy to their nation and religion. By their base misrepresentations the people were excited to such a degree of rage that the whole city was thrown into confusion, and the Apostle exposed to imminent danger.

danger. They seized and beat him, and were actually meditating his death, when Lysias, the Roman officer, interposed with an armed body, and rescued him out of their hands. It was with extreme difficulty, even then, that he escaped their fury. At the command of the captain, the soldiers bound him, and conducted him as a prisoner and a malefactor into the castle, while the infatuated mob cried out, "Away with him."

Are we not constrained to lament the contumelious usage and confinement of this eminent servant of Christ? We may be disposed to ask why the Lord should permit those, who are dear to himself, to be so insulted and oppressed, and the most zealous advocates for his cause to be prevented from prosecuting their schemes of usefulness in his church. But, alas! we are short-sighted creatures, and should not presume to censure or comprehend the conduct of Jehovah. "His way is in the sea, and his path in the great waters, and his footsteps are not known *." Yet we are assured that these very afflictions, which for a season cut off the Apostle from the public exercise of his ministry, eventually promoted the advancement of the Gospel †. Our fears for the safety of the ark are groundless. Let us cheerfully leave the care of it to God, and commit ourselves and the concerns of all his people to his sovereign disposal. Whatever unfavourable or painful circumstances may arise, let us look in faith and prayer for a happy issue.

St. Paul was now in chains; but, before he was committed to prison, he obtained permission of the captain to address the people in his own defence ‡. He began with declaring his extraction, education, and manner of life, and appealed to them who had known him for a proof of his former hatred and violent persecution of the Gospel. He delivered a minute account of his conversion, of the apostolic commission he had received from Christ to preach among all nations, and of the injunction given him in

* Psal. lxxvii. 19. † Phil. i. 12—14. ‡ Acts xxii. 1, &c.
a trance

a trance to depart from Jerusalem. He had wished to continue in that city, expecting that his ministry would be particularly successful among those who had been witnesses of his opposition to the faith. But Jesus, by his sovereign authority, commanded him to carry the message of peace to the Gentiles at a distance.

This open and ingenuous narrative of the Apostle seemed well calculated to impress the minds of the audience. His boldness in maintaining the Gospel before them, who had once known him as a blasphemer and a persecutor, is a strong evidence of its truth. But, though they could not deny his assertions, they were not convinced. The most striking facts, the most solid reasoning, and eloquent persuasions, will not be sufficient to subdue the human heart, unless God himself put forth his power, and make use of them for that purpose.

The Jews listened to the preacher till he mentioned his mission to the Gentiles; but this they could not bear. Such was their contempt and hatred of all other people, that they concluded a teacher from Heaven would never be sent among the Heathen nations. The pretension appeared to them little short of blasphemy. They showed every mark of indignation and abhorrence, tore off their clothes, and cast dust into the air, crying out, "Away with such a fellow from the earth; for it is not fit that he should live." Then indeed he was "made as the filth of the earth, and the off-scouring of all things *." If we likewise should meet with the most injurious treatment, let us not wonder or complain, when we perceive with what outrageous violence this man of God was rejected.

The Roman captain secured him, and, not understanding the ground of the opposition, supposing that he must have committed some great offence, commanded him to be examined by scourging, that a confession might be extorted. But Paul escaped the

* 1 Cor. iv. 13.

cruel torture by pleading his privilege as a Roman citizen; and it should seem that the officer had exceeded his authority in binding him. Lysias, however, was desirous to obtain clearer information of the business, and therefore, on the day following, convened the great council of the Jews for the trial of the prisoner, according to their particular customs. There, for the present, we leave him, arraigned before the sanhedrim, the object of their profane derision and contempt, yet not afraid of their terror, nor ashamed of the name of Jesus, in whom he believed.

How much may we learn from this example! When we look at his patient perseverance in the service of Christ, and reflect on our own inactivity, well may we cover our faces, and hide them in the dust. How little are any of us doing, in comparison of this zealous Apostle! And shall we not be animated, by a view of his conduct, to be more bold and vigorous, while we maintain our profession of the Gospel against all its opposers? Listen not to the foolish representations of those who would persuade you that all fervour in religion is hypocrisy, fanaticism, or madness, and that every thing better than lifeless formality is an unnecessary strictness, a weak scrupulosity, or a dangerous innovation. If you would be governed by the fashionable principles of the age, you must keep at a distance from the least imitation of St. Paul, and, wherever you discover a resemblance of his spirit, you must condemn it as a ridiculous preciseness. You must give up all earnest contention for right doctrines, and all the ardour of devotion; you must affirm that faith is nothing but fancy, and laugh at the mention of spiritual peace, and communion with God through the Holy Ghost as a vain delusion. O how much better is it to suffer like the Apostle, in defence of the truth, than thus to sacrifice conscience to interest or reputation!

But, if you are the most lively, diligent, and useful members of the church, the brightest ornaments of the Christian profession, you may learn from St. Paul

to

to place no dependence on your own attainments. Like him, you should preserve a constant sense of your unworthiness, and ascribe all the excellency of your best principles and performances to the sanctifying influence of God's Spirit. When he considered what talents he possessed, and what an eminent station he filled, his humble and devout acknowledgment was, "I am nothing:"—"not I, but the grace of God which was with me*." He renounced even his uncommon labours and extensive services, as of no avail in the point of acceptance with God: he gloried only in the cross of Christ, as procuring pardon and peace, and exulted as being complete in Him. It will be difficult, we allow, considering your corrupt nature, to exert yourselves to the utmost for the advancement of the Gospel, and yet with unfeigned humility to cast all your works at the feet of Jesus, trusting wholly in the efficacy of his sacrifice, and the merit of his obedience. But no otherwise can you maintain any well-grounded hope towards God. Your most admired duties, if not done in faith, will be rejected with abhorrence, and it will be said at the last, "Who hath required these at your hands?"

May the Lord Jesus Christ, therefore, be exalted in our estimation, as "the end of the law for righteousness!" With his holy Apostle, may we "rejoice in him, and have no confidence in the flesh!"

Amen.

* 2 Cor. xii. 41. 1 Cor. xv. 10.

SAINT PAUL.

SECT. 5.

Paul made his defence before the sanhedrim—encouraged by a vision—conspired against—sent to Cæsar—there pleaded his cause before Felix, and afterwards before Festus—appealed to Cæsar—brought, and permitted to be his own apologist, before King Agrippa.

It was predicted by our Lord that his Apostles should be brought before governors and kings for his sake*: but it does not appear that any of them was called to this honour so much as St. Paul. The great men of the earth, indeed, showed no desire to be acquainted with his doctrine, nor was he admitted to audience in his proper character, as an ambassador from Heaven; but he was conducted into their presence as a criminal. How mysterious are the ways of Providence! Paul was cast into bonds, in order that he might declare the truth of the Gospel to magistrates and princes. We shall now behold him in this very situation, arraigned before powerful and malicious enemies, yet, without timidity or painful anxiety for himself, most earnestly solicitous to save the souls of his hearers. O for the same bold and disinterested spirit in all the ministers of Christ! This would be the brightest ornament of their profession, and the strongest recommendation of the religion which they preach.

The Apostle was a prisoner at Jerusalem, in the custody of Roman soldiers. He had been with difficulty rescued out of the hands of a Jewish mob,

* Matt. x. 18.

which

which was incensed against him; and, the sanhedrim being summoned for his trial, he proceeded to make his defence. He maintained before the council the integrity of his heart and conduct, though he had been apprehended and accused as a criminal*. His countenance, as well as his speech, betokened a holy firmness and intrepidity, the effect of conscious innocence, and the animating influences of the divine Spirit. The high-priest, the president of the court, commanded him, in violation of all the forms of justice, to be smitten on the mouth, evidently showing a determination to silence him, or to hear nothing in his favour. The Apostle, however, not intimidated by such violent and injurious usage, reprehended his judge, and solemnly declared that God would shortly punish him for his base hypocrisy. It seems that there was an improper warmth of temper in the reproof: Paul immediately acknowledged that he was not aware of directing his censure against the high-priest. The intemperate exercise of power was with him no argument for resistance to authority, or disrespect to office. Yet, doubtless, he spake by a prophetic impulse; and, according to his sentence, God did soon afterwards "smite that whited wall" by a singular destruction. The example, as it ought not, so it cannot, be pleaded in justification of insolence or resentment towards magistrates: St. Paul himself was solicitous to guard against such an abuse of his conduct. He felt and bowed in submission to the command of the Scriptures, "Thou shalt not speak evil of the ruler of thy people†." Be it our concern to "live in all good conscience before God;" and then let us meekly commit to him the event of groundless and malicious accusations.

A prudent device of the Apostle disconcerted the measures of his adversaries for that time. He perceived that the assembly consisted partly of Pharisees, and partly of Sadducees, who differed widely in their sentiments, especially concerning the resur-

* Acts xxiii. 1, &c.

† Exod. xxii. 28.

rection

rection of the dead. He therefore declared himself attached to the sect of the Pharisees, and affirmed that for his defence of their leading doctrine he then stood arraigned before them. As many as were of this persuasion immediately showed an inclination to favour him, and proposed his dismissal. But so warm were the debates occasioned by the subject which he had started, that the council was thrown into the utmost confusion. The Roman officer began to fear for the safety of his prisoner, and, that he might not suffer through the fierceness of the disputants, interposed with an armed force for his deliverance, and conducted him back again to the castle. The Lord secures his people, amidst violent opposition, by various ways. Sometimes he protects them by permitting their enemies to be divided and incensed against each other. The hatred and variances amongst wicked men are frequently so great, that they cannot unite in any schemes for persecuting the church, as otherwise they would. Thus "the wrath of man shall praise God;" and promote the purposes of his sovereign pleasure.

Our Apostle remained in close confinement, distressed, probably, by gloomy apprehensions, as if he were cut off from all further opportunities of usefulness. The following night, however, the Lord graciously appeared in a vision to encourage and animate him, by an assurance that he should still continue his labours in the Gospel, and bear his testimony even at Rome, the imperial city. How tender are the compassions of our God towards his afflicted people! In general, when their troubles increase upon them, "their consolation also aboundeth by Christ*." What, then, have they to fear? Or, what can man do against them? If the Lord declare his approbation, and say to them, as he did to Paul, "Be of good cheer," they should account it a sufficient compensation for their severest persecutions, and be emboldened to face a host of enemies.

* 2 Cor. i. 5.

Fresh dangers awaited the Apostle at Jerusalem. Such was the fury of his opposers, that more than forty of them entered into an impious combination, and bound themselves under a curse to take away his life. Even the chief priests and elders concurred in the murderous design. But, though the horrid plan might seem to be well concerted, it was detected and defeated by the providence of God. A young man nearly related to St. Paul, being apprized of the scheme, carried information of it to the Roman officer; in consequence of which the prisoner was immediately removed, and sent under a strong guard to Cesarea. His accusers, also, were commanded to follow him, that the matter might there be fairly investigated before Felix the governor.

It may appear strange that one whose heart glowed with benevolence, and a desire of promoting universal happiness, should be pursued with such malignity and rage, as if he had been the vilest of his species and the pest of society. But in the opposition which was made to him, and other eminent saints, a striking proof of human depravity is exhibited. Whilst they were treated with contempt and abhorrence for righteousness' sake, it is obvious that the God whom they served was despised and hated: and, indeed, this enmity of the carnal mind against God is the grand source and cause of persecution, whatever may be pretended. But shall the faithful followers of Christ be intimidated? No: it is their privilege to maintain peace and joy, in dependence on their Almighty Redeemer. But "they that hate the righteous shall be desolate." Their wisest plans shall turn to their own confusion. While they "take counsel together,—He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall have them in derision*." Paul was rescued from his furious adversaries at Jerusalem by the very conspiracy for his destruction. "They thrust sore at him, that he might fall: but the Lord helped him †." Let others

* Psal. ii. 9, 4.

† cxviii. 13.

be encouraged from his case. "Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion; for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee *."

St. Paul was secured in Herod's palace at Cesarea till his accusers came. After a few days the high-priest and other members of the sanhedrim, with Tertullus, an insidious counsellor, at their head, appeared against him, and produced their charge before Felix †. The orator addressed the Roman governor in terms of the basest flattery, complimenting him upon the wisdom and excellency of his administration, though he was notoriously infamous for his oppression. He then inveighed against the prisoner, as having excited a seditious spirit through the whole body of the Jews, polluted their temple, and taken the most active part in spreading the principles of the Nazarenes, who were universally detested.

The Apostle, being permitted to answer in his own defence, protested his innocence, and challenged them to prove their allegations. He acknowledged, indeed, that his religious conduct was what they deemed heretical, but maintained that it was conformable to the ancient Scriptures, in which he had been educated, and that his hope of a general resurrection was no other than what they themselves allowed. He declared that he uniformly endeavoured to discharge his duty both to God and men, that his journey to Jerusalem had been undertaken for the purposes of charity and devotion, and that his appearance in the temple had not been attended with any irregular or tumultuous proceedings. He therefore called upon his persecutors to produce their evidence.

It is not probable that you, who serve the Lord Christ, will escape unjust and malicious censures, whatever prudence or benevolence you may possess. Perhaps the way in which you worship God may be reproached as heresy: but be not deterred by an ignominious name. It may be expedient, on certain

* Isa. xli. 6.

† Acts xxiv. 1, &c.

occasions,

occasions, to vindicate your principles and conduct; for that end you should be furnished with arguments; and, if you are truly upright with God, you also, like the Apostle, may be "bold as a lion," in the presence of your accusers. Only be you solicitous "to have always a conscience void of offence," that you may not provide them with objections, or give them any real advantage against you. But, if your own hearts condemn you, and the charges of your enemies be well founded, what shall we say? Though others attempt to justify and protect you, you will be a terror to yourselves, ready to flee "when no man pursueth *."

What, then, was the issue of the trial? Felix deferred the cause to another hearing, that he might obtain clearer information. He so far, however, favoured the prisoner, as to allow him some degree of liberty, and permit him to receive the communications and visits of his friends. Nor was this the only privilege he met with under his oppression and confinement. Whilst he was in that situation Paul was even called on to declare and maintain the Christian faith before this wicked governor and his adulterous wife Drusilla. They showed some desire to be acquainted with the doctrine of this extraordinary preacher: yet their motive, probably, was mere curiosity, which the Apostle did not endeavour to gratify. He aimed not to amuse them, but to fix an arrow of conviction in their consciences. Regardless of the event as to himself, he addressed them with peculiar solemnity on subjects which seemed calculated to awaken in them a sense of guilt, and to alarm their fears. "He reasoned of righteousness" before the man who had practised extreme injustice and oppression; "of temperance" and chastity before those who were then living in a state of incontinency; "and of judgment to come," that they might be excited to prepare for that awful account, which must be rendered at the tribunal of Heaven.

* Prov. xxviii. 1.

Some

Some may be astonished at the boldness of the Apostle, who endeavoured to bring his dignified hearers to repentance, rather than conciliate their favour, and exculpate himself. But this is the spirit which all the ministers of the Gospel should possess. Without any dread of consequences, they should declare to the most exalted personages their guilt and danger, and, instead of using flattering speeches, "warn them to flee from the wrath to come." Who will not acknowledge the propriety of such an address? The careless and abandoned are often constrained to feel the force of divine truth. The haughty judge trembled under the words of the prisoner, and therefore hastened to close the interview. *His heart was wounded within him, and he could not conceal its horrors. But, alas! unhappy man! he wished not to pursue the consideration of the painful subject; and yet he was not so obdurate as to determine finally to relinquish all thoughts of religion. He endeavoured to pacify his conscience by pleading his numerous engagements at that time, and promising a serious attention to the preacher "at a convenient season."*

Did that season ever come? Alas! no. He resisted his convictions; and, while they were stifled, they could not be productive of good effects. Afterwards, indeed, he frequently heard the Apostle, and entered into conversation with him; but we do not read that he trembled any more. He was actuated by covetousness, and, instead of inquiring for salvation, sought to obtain a bribe, for which he would have released the prisoner. But, as he failed in that attempt, he retained him in custody, though no crime had been proved against him; and even after two years, when he was recalled from his government, he still left him in bonds, merely that he might recommend himself to the Jews. What complicated iniquity was this! How lamentable that the deep impressions made upon his heart should serve only to aggravate his guilt!

O, sinners,

O, sinners, beware how you trifle with your convictions, when you are awakened to a sense of your misery by the faithful declarations of God's word! Like Felix, perhaps you may be inclined to dismiss the preacher, and turn away from those offensive subjects by which your consciences are alarmed. Are you resolved, then, to cast off all thoughts of God and eternal things? No: you hope that at some future opportunity you shall be more at liberty to attend to your spiritual concerns. Ah! Sirs, what means this procrastination? Is not your short life hastening to a close? Is not judgment approaching? May you not be suddenly called to the tribunal of Heaven? Or may you not, by your unwillingness to submit, provoke God to leave you to your own devices, and to say, in righteous indignation, "Let them alone." To what other season are you looking forwards? Or what can be so convenient as the present? Do not, therefore, delay the important business. Yield to your own convictions: stop not your ears against the truth, but desire to feel its full influence; and soon will your horrors and distressing apprehensions give place to the liveliest emotions of hope and joy.

A. D. St. Paul was left at Cesarea, and the rage of ⁶² his enemies had not yet subsided. Festus succeeded to the government of Judea, and, upon his going to Jerusalem, received a powerful application against the prisoner from the members of the sanhedrim*. They petitioned that he might be sent for to Jerusalem, and intended to murder him by the way. But the scheme was defeated. Through the secret influence of God upon his mind, Festus would not comply with the request. He commanded the accusers to attend him to Cesarea, where he himself proposed to hear and decide the cause. There the trial was instituted, and Paul once more put upon his defence. The same groundless and malicious charges were brought against him as before;

* Acts xxv. 1, &c.

and

and he, with his usual intrepidity, persisted in asserting his innocence. Still justice was denied him. The governor was disposed not only to trifle, but even to give him up to his enemies; for he proposed, that, according to their request, the matter should be referred to the council at Jerusalem.

What, then, could the Apostle expect from such arbiters? He saw through the design, and refused to submit. He declared his readiness to suffer extreme punishment, if he had deserved it, but maintained that he had done no wrong. As a Roman citizen, therefore, he claimed the privilege of being tried before the emperor, and boldly appealed unto Cæsar. This appeal, which stopped or suspended all further proceedings in the lower courts of the empire, was not the effect of cowardice: he did not shrink from bonds, or death itself: but he has taught us that it may be expedient for a Christian to assert his civil rights, and demand the protection and immunities which the laws of his country allow him. We should, however, beware of a petulant and litigious spirit: the example before us will not justify a wanton opposition to government, or a propensity to contend for every little grievance.

It was determined, then, that the cause should be submitted to Cæsar's decision, and Paul sent as a prisoner to Rome. Thus his desire of visiting that city was granted, and the divine promise fulfilled, though, probably, in a very different way from what he had expected. But, before he stood in the presence of the emperor, another opportunity was given him for declaring the truths of the Gospel to certain personages of exalted rank; and on that occasion he bore, as usual, an honourable testimony.

King Agrippa, who possessed a large extent of dominion under the Romans, and his sister Bernice, with whom it is supposed that he lived in a state of incestuous commerce, came together to pay their respects to the new governor, Festus. During their continuance at Cesarea, they were made acquainted

with

with the cause of the Apostle. Festus informed them on what grounds he had retained this remarkable prisoner in bonds; but in his relation he evidently treated with contempt the Gospel which Paul preached, as consisting of unmeaning and superstitious questions concerning one Jesus, who was dead, and yet was affirmed to be alive. Alas! it is obvious, from their confused accounts, that men do not seriously attend to the doctrines of Christianity. They who feel not the importance of eternal things trifle with the most solemn declarations of God's word; possibly they may consider even the death and resurrection of Christ as an uninteresting story, and of dubious authority. How different are the sentiments of the real believer! With what fixed regard and lively joy does he listen to those who testify of the crucified and risen Saviour! This is the subject with which, above all others, he wishes to be acquainted.

Agrippa desired to hear the singular preacher of whom Festus spoke; and the next day was appointed for that purpose. The court was summoned; the illustrious personages, together with the principal officers of the army and inhabitants of the city, attended; and Paul was brought forth to make his defence. When the cause had been opened by Festus, Agrippa intimated to the prisoner that he would be allowed the full liberty of pleading for himself*. And now our eyes are turned to the Apostle, and we are solicitous to observe how he acquits himself in such an assembly. In this difficult situation he shines with peculiar lustre, and exhibits the most striking proofs of wisdom, courage, faithfulness, and zeal. Here we contemplate the Christian orator addressing his noble auditors with graceful eloquence, with evident marks of politeness and learning, yet with an artless simplicity, with a tender and affectionate concern for their everlasting salvation. He was anxious to recommend the Gospel, rather than himself, to their favourable

* Acts xxvi. 1, &c.

regard.

regard. Agrippa being his principal hearer, to him chiefly was this admirable speech directed.

The Apostle, stretching forth his hand, that he might engage attention by his respectful and earnest manner, declared that he rejoiced in the opportunity of entering on his own vindication before so competent a judge, who was acquainted with the Scriptures and customs of the Jews. Having requested a patient audience, he proceeded to state what he had once been as a Pharisee, and what hope he then possessed as a Christian. He alleged that this hope towards God, through the Saviour, which was the subject of promise to the ancient fathers, and the professed expectation and desire of all the Jewish tribes, had been the sole ground of his persecution. He adverted to the doctrine of a resurrection, and the absurdity of rejecting it as incredible, and yet intimated that none could be more prejudiced against that or any other truth than he had formerly been against the whole system of the Gospel. He enlarged upon his enmity and bitter opposition to the Christian name, and gave a particular relation of that miraculous vision, in which Jesus had appeared from heaven, subdued his rebellious spirit, and commissioned him to go forth among the Gentiles as a preacher of the grand mysteries of redemption. He affirmed, that, for his obedience to that mandate, his countrymen were violently incensed, and attempted his life. He devoutly ascribed to God his continued support in the discharge of his sacred function to that day; and maintained that Moses and the Prophets predicted what he taught,—the death and resurrection of the Redeemer, and the offer of light and salvation, founded on those events, to the Jew first, and then to the benighted Heathen.

St. Paul evidently considered his own conversion, not only as a singular display of divine mercy, but as an incontestable proof of the truth of Christianity; and therefore he was ready upon every occasion to propose it to the notice of others, for the honour of his

his God and Saviour. And surely the account sufficiently justifies his conduct. Do we not allow that he acted a reasonable and wise part in renouncing his former errors, and becoming a strenuous advocate for Christ? But are we willing to follow his example, as far as the difference of our circumstances will permit? What means our commendation of this illustrious character, if we dislike those sentiments, tempers, and practices, which constituted its chief excellence?

The effect of the Apostle's address upon two of his principal hearers deserves our regard. Festus, considering the doctrines asserted as abstruse and ridiculous, or as enthusiastic jargon, concluded that the preacher, if an honest man, must certainly be deranged in his senses, though he allowed him the credit of being a scholar. He therefore interrupted the discourse, and cried aloud, "Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad." The same objection has been often urged against all those who zealously contend for the grand distinguishing characteristics of the Christian system. Careless inattentive persons, who take no pains to examine the subject, treat these sublime and heavenly truths as perfectly unintelligible, and the fiction of a disordered imagination. In vindication of themselves for rejecting the Gospel, they endeavour to cast an odium upon its advocates, and represent them, however sincere they may be, yet as men weak or insane, whose faculties have been injured by deep thinking on certain intricate points. But is the decision of such judges to be received? Or shall we be staggered by their insinuations? Then we must turn away with disgust from all who are of Paul's complexion, and conclude that, when men come to their right minds by submitting to the Saviour, and strenuously maintain his cause, they justly forfeit their reputation for understanding, and are no longer to be listened to. What a wretched infatuation is this! Let us not be deterred by such invidious censures, but be willing

to be "fools for Christ's sake*," and welcome the reproach.

The Apostle replied to the charge with great energy, and yet with all proper deference: "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak forth the words of truth and soberness." He then turned to Agrippa, and, by a masterly and spirited address, appealed to him, as being convinced of the facts which he had asserted, and of their exact correspondence with the ancient predictions. As if he perceived the inward feelings of his royal auditor, and would extort a confession, he said, "King Agrippa, believest thou the Prophets? I know that thou believest." Indeed Agrippa's mind appeared to be deeply impressed. He could not, like Festus, deride or condemn the preacher, but rather was disposed to become his convert. He doubted not of his integrity, assented to the doctrines delivered, and seemed on the point of yielding an entire compliance with the Gospel. He replied, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." Probably he resisted the force of truth, through the fear of temporal inconveniences.

This acknowledgment, though favourable, did not satisfy St. Paul. He was assured that such partial convictions could never secure the salvation of the soul; and therefore he prayed that neither the king nor any of the assembly might rest in them. With tenderest affection for all before him, he expressed his earnest desire that they might thoroughly enter into his views, and resemble him, save in the chains which he then wore: he wished them all the happiness, but none of the painful trials, which he felt. He exclaimed, "I would to God, that not only thou, but also all that hear me this day, were both almost and altogether such as I am, except these bonds." This devout aspiration clearly manifested his unbounded benevolence, his full confidence of the goodness of his cause, and the blessedness which he experienced in the midst of sufferings. He was not

* 1 Cor. iv. 10.

ashamed

ashamed of being "the prisoner of the Lord;" he envied not the king and governor their pomp or power; he could not declare his best wishes for them in stronger terms than by praying that they might be brought to the same state of mind with himself.

The Apostle was dismissed: probably his noble auditors could bear no more. It was agreed, however, among them, that he had not deserved any punishment, and might have been released, but that, in consequence of his own appeal, the cause must be referred to the decision of Cæsar.

And now, upon a serious review of this history, we would inquire of our readers, not what is your opinion of St. Paul (respecting which he himself would not have been solicitous), but what think you of your own character? What of the Saviour, whom he preached? Have you seriously attended to the doctrines which he maintained? And what impression have they produced upon your minds? Perhaps, upon the first hearing, you have been disposed, like Festus, to treat them with contempt, as a visionary system, involving only doubtful and superstitious questions. But if you examine more minutely, and with more fixed and determinate regard, you will discover, at least, that Christianity is capable of being defended by solid and unanswerable arguments, and that folly is justly chargeable upon those who affect to sneer at what they cannot confute.

If you allow the truth and excellency of the Gospel, we ask again, Have you unfeignedly complied with its demands? Ah! how many resemble Agrippa, and are inclined to resist or trifle with their convictions! You grant that to be a Christian indeed is a high and honourable distinction, and you profess a desire of attaining it. But you are obstructed by such difficulties, and assaulted by such temptations, that you have not courage, for the present at least, to attempt the arduous work, as thinking it impossible to succeed. Or perhaps you may be willing to yield only a partial submission, as far as may suit you

your convenience; and thus, with apparently good impressions and resolutions, you may remain destitute of the power of religion. You are "almost persuaded;" and here you rest. Will this satisfy your consciences? Or can you seriously expect, in such a state, to inherit the promises of God? O why will you not consent to advance a little further, and be "altogether" what you know you ought to be? There are those, of a sound understanding and solid judgment, who can tell you of the blessedness which they have found in the service of Christ. They argue rightly that it is not a vain illusion of the fancy, but a delightful reality, by which they are supported and comforted in severest dangers and distresses. With tender compassion and affectionate importunity they press you to make the trial, that you may partake of their happiness. O, credit their testimony, and reject not your own mercies! May He, who alone can subdue the human heart to himself, render the exhortation effectual, and persuade you to embrace the Gospel without reserve! May the mighty influence of his grace enable you to break through all your difficulties, and make you not only almost, but altogether, Christians! Amen.