

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.

SAINT

## SAINT PAUL.

## SECT. 6.

*Paul sent as a prisoner to Rome—experienced great difficulties in his voyage—shipwrecked on the island of Melita—wrought miracles there, and received kindness—proceeded to Rome—dwelt and preached in his own house under custody—released—travelled and laboured as before—was again imprisoned, and at last beheaded.*

THE promises of God in due season will be fulfilled, though the events to which they refer may seem to us in the highest degree improbable. What we call difficulties cannot possibly defeat or obstruct the divine counsel. A firm persuasion and practical application of this acknowledged truth will produce in our minds submission, composure, confidence, and joy, throughout our various changes and calamities. If, in dependence on the gracious declarations of God, we believe that we "shall not perish, but have eternal life," we shall cheerfully expect the final consummation of our bliss, whatever enemies may assault us, or dangers beset our path. We shall say, like the great Apostle whom we are now contemplating, "The Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me to his heavenly kingdom\*." The history before us will show that this strong assurance of the divine faithfulness was not disappointed. Let us then take hold of the covenant which God hath established in Jesus Christ; so shall "all things work together for good," and with lively hope we may "cast all our care upon Him, for he careth for us †."

\* 2 Tim. iv. 18. † Rom. viii. 28. 1 Pet. v. 7.

St.

St. Paul had appealed to Cæsar against the malicious accusations of the Jews. As a Roman citizen, he claimed the privilege of bringing his cause before the emperor; for it seemed that justice was denied him at the inferior tribunals. The preceding circumstances which led to this demand were so ordered, through the controlling influence of God, as to be the means of fulfilling the declaration, that the Apostle must bear witness to the Gospel at Rome. He was accordingly sent thither as a prisoner, together with some others in similar circumstances, under the care of Julius, a centurion\*. They went by sea, and the voyage proved extremely distressing and dangerous. Paul was accompanied by two Christian friends, Luke the beloved physician, and Aristarchus a Macedonian, who cheerfully partook of his sufferings, and, as his faithful associates, afforded him peculiar consolation†. He was, also, treated with much kindness by the Roman officer; and therefore at Sidon, where they called, he was permitted to visit his pious acquaintance, and procure refreshment. From this place they proceeded to Myra, and, having there changed their ship, they were afterwards so retarded by contrary winds, that with great difficulty they reached the Fair Havens, a port in the island of Crete.

As the season was far advanced, the Apostle advised the managers of the vessel not to prosecute the voyage before winter, and solemnly warned them of the extreme danger attending it, which had, probably, been intimated to him by revelation. But, his precaution not being regarded, they again set sail, and soon perceived their folly. They were overtaken by a violent storm, and driven to the utmost distress, even so as to be in constant expectation of perishing. For several days they saw neither sun nor stars to guide them, and of necessity abandoned the ship to the winds and waves. They cast overboard the articles of merchandise with which

\* Acts xxvii. 1, &amp;c.

† Col. iv. 10, 11. Philem. 24.

they

they were laden, and, what seemed far more valuable in their circumstances, their very tackling: they apprehended that they themselves also should be overwhelmed in the deep.

How then did it appear that Paul was under the immediate care and protection of Heaven? Unbelief might have suggested that the promise failed, and that God had forgotten to be gracious\*. But that season of extremity rendered the divine interposition, in favour of the Apostle, the more conspicuous, and showed to all the company the peculiar excellence and worth of this prisoner. He stood forth before them, and, while he blamed their contempt of his former advice, exhorted them to dismiss their fears, on the ground of the Lord's express declaration to him in the preceding night. With firmness and courage, he avowed, in the presence of idolaters, his relation and devotedness to the true God, affirming, "His I am, and Him I serve." He told them how he had been assured by an angel that he must certainly be arraigned at Cæsar's tribunal, and that, though they must suffer shipwreck, the whole number of persons with him, amounting to more than two hundred and seventy, should be spared for his sake. Thus, then, a peculiar honour was put upon the Lord's minister; and the careless navigators surely were constrained to attend to his voice. They could not but perceive that he was supported and comforted by a God whom they knew not, and whom the winds and seas obeyed. They saw him composed and cheerful amidst the roaring of the waves, while they themselves were oppressed with terrible fear. Who would not wish to enjoy the same confidence of the divine favour?

Trials and dangers manifest the advantage of genuine piety. For this end the Lord afflicts his people, that they may prove the tenderness of his regard and the power of his grace. He is glorified in them, when, through a dependence on his word,

\* Psal. lxxvi. 8, 9.

they

they can submit, trust, and rejoice, amidst storms and tempests. This is what others know not, and cannot attain. We ask, Can you of a truth declare, as St. Paul, "His I am, and Him I serve?" Or, are you not ashamed to avow your attachment to him in the presence of his enemies? If you do indeed confide in his mercy, his promise to you will be sure: "He will never leave you, nor forsake you." Though you may seem to be tossed upon a troubled ocean, nothing shall separate you from his love, or prevent the accomplishment of his purposes in your behalf. Like the Apostle, "believe God, that it shall be even as it is told you:" you need not desire any better security for your hopes. You should also feel compassion, and offer many prayers for those around you, *in the same town or family, who know not the Lord: perhaps they will be spared for your sakes.*

After thirteen days of perplexity and distress, the mariners suspected, about midnight, that they were approaching to some land, and were alarmed by the fear of being dashed to pieces upon rocks. They formed the scheme, therefore, of escaping in the small boat; but Paul prevented them, by declaring to the centurion that their continuance in the ship was necessary to the safety of the whole. Though assured that no lives could be lost, yet he thought it absolutely requisite to hinder their flight: and, if we do not remember that the events which God hath promised are inseparably connected with the means which he hath ordained, our faith will lead us to presumption. The boat was abandoned: and, while they were eagerly wishing for the light, he expressed his confidence that all should be preserved, and encouraged them to take food for their refreshment, as their strength was nearly exhausted. He looked up to God, in their presence, with devout adoration of his goodness for the bread which yet remained: he himself did eat, and they were induced to follow his example.

The day came on, and they perceived that they were

were approaching to the shore. They endeavoured to direct the ship into a creek; but through the violence of the current they were driven upon the sand, and by the force of the waves the vessel was broken in pieces. All was confusion. The soldiers, dreading the escape of the prisoners, proposed to despatch them; but, for the Apostle's sake, they were spared. Unwilling to consent to his death, the centurion interposed to prevent the scheme, and gave orders that all might be permitted to consult their own safety; and thus the whole company were preserved by different means, and conveyed to land.

We perceive the hand of God overruling these various circumstances, for the protection of his faithful servant, and with a view to the propagation of the Gospel. In like manner He will render all events subservient to the final deliverance of his people; but in the mean season He proves their sincerity by making them pass through much tribulation. We would encourage your expectation of a happy issue, if you be truly reconciled to him by Jesus Christ. Many and formidable dangers may seem to obstruct your path; but you shall surely reach the promised inheritance. In your own apprehension you may escape with much difficulty, like the shipwrecked mariners before us, who were borne to the shore, "some on boards, and some on broken pieces of the ship:" yet the Lord whom you trust will bring you to your desired haven.

The scattered company were again collected on the island of Melita, where, in their distress, they met with remarkable kindness from the inhabitants\*. Some circumstances also, upon their landing, drew the general attention to St. Paul, and perhaps prepared the way for a favourable acceptance of the Gospel in that place. Whilst he was employed in assisting to kindle a fire, a viper suddenly fastened upon his hand.

He had been preserved from the violence of a tem-

\* Acts xxviii. 1, &c.

pest and the rage of the sea; and now the venomous bite of a little animal was thought likely to be fatal. Ah! what is our life? To how many dangers are we exposed! No sooner are we delivered from one than another succeeds; nor is there a moment in which we are not liable to a fresh attack. Any trifling event, as well as that which appears most formidable, may prove destructive. But the serpent could not hurt the Apostle when the God of heaven was engaged to protect: he shook it into the fire, and felt no harm. The natives beheld and wondered. They expected his immediate death from this poisonous creature, and considered him as a murderer whom divine vengeance had marked for its object. But, when they saw that no bad effect followed, they were ready to adore him as a deity.

A miraculous influence was exerted by the Apostle, not for himself alone, but for the relief of others. Publius, a principal person, probably the governor of the island, entertained the shipwrecked company with singular hospitality; and he was well repaid for his kindness. His father being afflicted with a disease which threatened his life, Paul prayed for him, and instantly restored his health. Different cures being also wrought upon other inhabitants, they were disposed to revere this man of God, and to provide both him and his associates with every thing necessary for their voyage. During their stay, which was three months, he doubtless took the opportunity of recommending the Saviour to their notice and acceptance, and improved the time of his abode amongst them for the most valuable purposes. Such was his fervent zeal that he could not refrain his lips from proclaiming the rich mercy of God in Jesus Christ. And perhaps this shipwreck proved the happy means of healing the souls as well as the bodies of many of these courteous islanders, and of extending salvation to them who were ready to perish.

At length the company departed from the place; and, after touching at Syracuse and Rhegium, came to

to Puteoli, where, at the request of certain Christians, Paul and his friends obtained permission to remain a week. Afterwards he proceeded by land towards Rome. The account of his approach had reached that famous city; and in such estimation was he there held among them who had embraced the faith, that they went out to meet him, some to the distance of fifty, others of more than thirty miles, and conducted him on the road.

Their kind attendance in such circumstances afforded him peculiar pleasure; it excited gratitude to God, and inspired him with fresh life and vigour. Perhaps he began to droop; but, when he saw the dear brethren, to whom he had written his invaluable epistle a few years before, and over whom he had rejoiced as fellow-heirs of the kingdom, he was cheered and animated. "He thanked God, and took courage." Then he was willing that Nero should do his worst: he shrunk not from danger or death when he perceived some of the glorious effects of divine grace among the inhabitants of Rome; and he gave vent to the noblest affections, while he felt a warm attachment to these followers of his Lord, and the strongest emotions of delight in their society. We ask, Is this the kind of happiness which you have experienced? Do you "love the brotherhood," or know any thing of "the communion of saints?" Would the very sight of them revive your hearts, when oppressed with trouble? We pity you, as strangers to the most exquisite sensibility, if you have not tasted the sweetness of Christian friendship. But, if you enjoy that inestimable privilege, we exhort you to improve it for mutual edification and comfort. Value your opportunities of intercourse with pious persons, and, by your conversation and prayers, endeavour to inspire each other with a holy fortitude, though you are travelling together, as Paul and his companions were, to meet a powerful and malignant enemy.

When they came to Rome, the prisoners were de-

livered to the proper officer; but the Apostle, being separated from the rest, was permitted, by peculiar favour, to dwell in a habitation of his own, under the custody of a soldier, to whom probably he was chained. In this new situation he showed the same zeal and courage for the defence and propagation of the Gospel as before. Three days after his arrival he sent for the principal persons among the Jews who resided there, and explained to them the true cause of his imprisonment. He assured them that he was brought into those circumstances, not for any real offence committed, but only for maintaining "the hope of Israel," and publishing that salvation which had been promised to this people, and was then procured for them by their long-expected Messiah.

They had nothing to allege in reply except the general prejudice which has always been urged as an objection to the religion of Jesus when its powerful influence appears: "This sect is every where spoken against." Many desired to hear his account of Christianity: a time was set; and for a whole day together he continued to expound and prove the doctrines of the Gospel from their own Scriptures, and earnestly persuaded them to accept the Saviour. The effect was different upon different persons; some of them embracing the faith, but others rejecting it with contempt. While they contended among themselves, the Apostle dismissed them with that prophetic admonition which was once delivered to their fathers, denouncing a judicial blindness and obduracy of heart as a punishment for slighted mercy\*. He then declared, that, having proposed to them the offer of salvation, he should turn to the Gentiles, and doubted not of a favourable reception.

In this state of confinement St. Paul remained two years, his cause being neglected or deferred by the emperor. But, even there, he obtained peculiar indulgence, and was eminently honoured as an instrument of extensive good. Though a prisoner, he met

\* Isa. vi. 9, 10.

with

with no interruption: his labours were more private and contracted than before, but they were still unceasing. All who chose had free access to him for instruction; and he continued, without fear or restraint, to exhibit the glorious character of the Redeemer, and inculcate a cordial submission to the government of his grace. Yet, wise and earnest as his exhortations were, we wonder not that they were despised by many on account of the ignominious situation of the preacher. Whilst he appeared as a criminal, chained by the hand to a common soldier, there must have been a strong prejudice against him, and a considerable difficulty in believing that he was so distinguished a messenger of Heaven, appointed to declare the way of salvation. But some were disposed by a divine influence to look beyond the meanness of his external circumstances, and to receive his word with reverence and obedience, as the word of the living God. O, how great is the mercy, to be delivered from all those carnal regards and common objections, which unfit the mind for a fair examination of the truth!

We learn, from several of St. Paul's epistles, that his labours at Rome were attended with great success. There had been, indeed, for some years, a society of Christians in that place, whose "faith was spoken of throughout the whole world\*." But at this time they became more confirmed in their principles, and saw their numbers increase. The Lord God can make his cause and his people to prosper under the heaviest pressures, and in spite of the most violent opposition. We might have thought, while the Apostle was a prisoner for the Gospel's sake, that men would have been afraid or ashamed to profess any attachment to him or his doctrines. But the contrary effect appeared; and it wonderfully displayed the hand of God. "Many of the brethren, waxing confident by his bonds, were much more bold to speak the word without fear†." Fresh converts

\* Rom. i. 8.

† Phil. i. 14.

were

were added to the church. Onesimus, who, it should seem, had been a dishonest servant of Philemon, heard the preacher in his confinement, and, being brought to repentance, became "a faithful and beloved brother\*." Then also the Gospel found admission, where we should have imagined it impossible to succeed, even in the court of Nero. That profane prince hated and persecuted this new religion; but some of his attendants or domestics were led to examine and embrace it, in consequence of the imprisonment of its most strenuous advocate, and proved an honour to their profession †.

How mysterious are the ways of God! He accomplishes his purposes by such means as we should never have devised. What situation could be more unfavourable to Christianity than the palace of the emperor? But Jehovah "will work, and who shall let it ‡?" An Apostle is sent to Rome under criminal accusations, and pleads his cause before Cæsar, in order that some of the household may hear and be converted. The dark dispensation was big with mercy. The events which we should have lamented as most deplorable were designed to confirm and propagate the Gospel. Let us cheerfully leave the care of the church in the Lord's hands. He reigneth; and he best knows what is most expedient for his own glory.

The various societies of Christians in different parts, and even to this very day, have reaped great advantage from the bonds of St. Paul. Had he not been a prisoner, he might not have written so large a portion of the sacred volume. Some of the rich fruits of his confinement we perceive in those excellent epistles which are addressed to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Hebrews: and we praise God that the leisure afforded him at Rome was employed for our profit. It appears, from those animated and inspired compositions, that he rejoiced in his sufferings, and was so far carried above the fear of death as

\* Philem. 10. Col. iv. 9. † Phil. i. 13. iv. 22. ‡ Isa. xliii. 13.

to exult in the prospect\*. It has been thought that he then felt more than ever the blessedness of his own principles, and enjoyed a peculiar elevation of soul. O, let us not shrink from afflictions! They may be designed to confirm and increase our experience of the power and comforts of true religion.

The distresses of the Apostle gave occasion to some kind and liberal exertions among his friends. He received seasonable supplies for his support from the Christians at Philippi, by that honoured messenger Epaphroditus, "who ministered to his wants †." Onesiphorus, also, is commended for having "often refreshed him, and not being ashamed of his chain ‡." But he met with trials more painful than the fury of his avowed enemies from the perfidy of false professors, and the unsteadiness of certain sincere believers. "All they," says he, "which are in Asia, are turned away from me §." Many of his former friends were so influenced by selfish regards or misconceptions of his conduct, as to show a strange disaffection. Nay, he declares, that when he was brought before Nero, "at his first answer, no man stood with him; but all men forsook him ||." Such a general desertion was beyond measure afflictive. We are ready to ask, Where were the Christians, whom he celebrated in his epistle? Where the brethren, who travelled fifty miles to meet him? Or why this change of disposition? How forcibly does this teach us that "it is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man ¶!" Yet let us beware of drawing rash conclusions, or condemning all those as hypocrites who may betray an occasional weakness and timidity. Such weakness and timidity have appeared in the best and most eminent men; as we might instance in our great reformer Archbishop Cranmer, and in the Apostle Peter. Perhaps the very persons, who behaved in this disgraceful manner at Rome, were

\* Col. i. 24. Phil. i. 20—24.  
† 2 Tim. i. 16. § 15. ¶ iv. 16.

‡ ii. 25. iv. 18.

¶ Psal. cxviii. 8.

afterwards

afterwards recovered, and enabled to give decisive proofs of integrity, fortitude, and zeal.

A. D. At the end of two years, St. Paul, being <sup>65.</sup> arraigned before the emperor, was honourably acquitted, and restored to his liberty. That cruel and haughty tyrant seemed unlikely to favour the prisoner; but Nero's fury was restrained, because it was designed that the life of this faithful ambassador for Christ should be spared a little longer for the benefit of the church. Hear his own account: "The Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion \*." O be encouraged to persevere with holy fervour and intrepidity, if you serve the Lord Christ! Your divine Master will surely protect you against all the machinations of your opponents, and support you in your place till the work assigned you be completed.

After his release, the Apostle travelled as before, and continued with his usual assiduity to propagate the Gospel. During that time, which was two or three years, he made a journey to Spain, and, as some have thought, to France, and, possibly, to this island †. Perhaps he took another circuit among the Asiatic churches, established Christian societies in Crete, which he committed to the care of Titus, and again visited the Philippians, as he had intimated, "for their furtherance and joy of faith ‡." This, at least, is evident, that he was not ashamed or weary of the service in which he had embarked, and that he ceased not from his labours of love till he put off his earthly tabernacle. He returned to Rome, with the view, probably, of confirming his former testimony in that city, and, on some pretence or other, was once more cast into prison. St. Chrysostom relates that a concubine of Nero being converted by means of the Apostle, the tyrant was exasperated, com-

\* 2 Tim. iv. 17.

† Rom. xv. 24.

‡ Phil. i. 25. ii. 24. Titus i. 5. Philem. 22. Heb. xiii. 23.

manded

manded him to be taken into custody, and soon afterwards put him to death.

In that last confinement he wrote his second epistle to Timothy, under the expectation of suffering: and for that reason it contains his most deliberate sentiments and most solemn views of eternity. It appears that he did not repent of his exertions in the service of his Lord, did not fluctuate in his opinions, or stagger in his hopes. The strain in which he writes, the language of victory over death and hell, abundantly manifests that he still wished to encourage others in the faith, and exulted in his own prospects of heaven. How animated are his expressions! "I am not ashamed; for I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day \*." "I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing †." The knowledge and the love of Christ will enable us likewise to speak the same language, and inspire us with confidence and joy, though we should see death approaching in the most tremendous forms. Ah! how few have felt the full influence of the Gospel, or attained its exalted privileges! This may teach us to account for our sloth and cowardice. While we are strangers to the grace of Jesus, it is no wonder that we decline every arduous service, and tremble at the intimations of our dissolution.

A. D. St. Paul closed his life in the most honourable <sup>67.</sup> manner, and sealed with his blood the doctrines which he had long so zealously maintained. He suffered about the same time as St. Peter, but not by crucifixion: being a Roman citizen, he was beheaded. It is surprising, not that he was cut off by

\* 2 Tim. i. 12.

† iv. 6-8.

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the hand of violence at last, but that so firm an advocate for the Gospel should be spared so long, in the midst of powerful and malignant opposers. How eminent does his character appear! How valuable his labours! How glorious his death! Do we not consider his crown of martyrdom as an enviable distinction? Let us fight the good fight of faith; and we also shall conquer, as he did, when taking leave of the world.

He was exalted above others by his wisdom, zeal, and success; by gifts, visions, and revelations of the Lord. "He was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words \*." He "was not a whit behind the very chiefest Apostles †:" nay, he "laboured more abundantly than they all ‡," and, probably, possessed peculiar powers and authority in his high function §. But, notwithstanding his honourable privileges, his sufferings were extreme; and even in these he seemed more especially to exult. Let us hear his own account: "We are troubled on every side,—perplexed,—persecuted,—cast down,—always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus ||:" "in all things approving ourselves as the ministers of God in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings ¶." "Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck; a night and a day I have been in the deep: in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the Heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside these things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches \*\*."

\* 2 Cor. xii. 4. † xi. 5. ‡ 1 Cor. xv. 10. § 1 Cor. v. 4, 5.  
Cor. x. 8. xiii. 10. || 2 Cor. iv. 8—10. ¶ vi. 4, 5. \*\* xi. 24—28.

He

He had one particular trial, of which a clear account is not given us. He calls it "a thorn in the flesh \*;" which implies that it was something as painful to his mind as a sharp or pointed instrument, continually piercing him, would be to his body. Some suppose it to have been a deformed appearance, or difficulty of elocution; to his enemies a handle for reproach, and to himself the occasion of distress, as it rendered his preaching less acceptable. The objection was urged; "His bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible †." This seemed likely to obstruct his usefulness, and might excite in him the keenest anguish. But, whatever the affliction was, his spiritual adversary took the advantage, and made it the ground of a severe temptation: it was "the messenger of Satan to buffet him." Yet God permitted it for his good, and designed it to prevent or counteract any bad effect which his eminence in the church might produce upon his mind: it was given to him, "lest he should be exalted above measure, through the abundance of the revelations." In this, however, as in other trials, he sought relief from Heaven. He prayed with peculiar importunity, and obtained that remarkable assurance from the Saviour, "My grace is sufficient for thee; for my strength is made perfect in weakness." Upon this his fears were dispersed: and, perceiving a peculiar suitableness and mercy in the appointment, he declared, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." The example is highly instructive: it shows us the nature, necessity, and salutary tendency, of those calamities and temptations by which advanced believers are frequently oppressed; and it likewise teaches us with what temper of mind we should suffer, and what strong support and consolation we may expect if we confide in the Redeemer.

After all, the most distinguishing lineaments in

\* 2 Cor. xii. 7—10.

† x. 10.

the



the Apostle's character were an unshaken and affectionate attachment to his Lord, an extensive and generous benevolence to men, and an ardent desire to save their souls, whatever dangers he himself might sustain. The warmest professions seemed too weak to express the fervour of his heart. What words are those! "The love of Christ constraineth us\*." "I will very gladly spend and be spent for you; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I be loved †." "Yea, and if I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy and rejoice with you all ‡."

We are aware that even a distant resemblance and imitation of the pattern here exhibited would now be laughed at as the sure mark of madness and enthusiasm. But the fear of such reproach ought not to deter us: it will be an honourable badge, in which we may glory. Few, alas! are in danger of coming under that censure. Are not we very remote from that peculiar excellency of temper and conduct for which the Apostle has been so justly celebrated? And will it avail us any thing to admire this bright example, or that of any other saint, if we persist in those practices which are totally dissimilar and opposite? No: we shall thereby betray, more evidently, our own baseness, and render more sure our final condemnation. But if, with sincerity of heart, we desire and endeavour to follow St. Paul, as he followed Christ, we may triumph in the hope of being where he is, and of joining the glorious company of those who are redeemed to God from the earth, and who shall surround his throne for ever.

\* 2 Cor. v. 14.

† xii. 15.

‡ Phil. ii. 17.

CORNELIUS.

## CORNELIUS.

## CHAP. X.

*Cornelius a Roman centurion—his devotion and liberality—was encouraged by an Angel, and directed to send for St. Peter—received the Apostle, and desired his instructions—was endued with the Holy Ghost, and baptized—requested Peter's continuance—probably retained his situation in the army.*

THE calling of the Gentiles and their admission into the Christian church is an event of great importance in ecclesiastical history; and a distinct account is given us of the way in which that gracious dispensation was introduced. The Apostles had been charged to teach all nations, and to receive by baptism those who should profess the faith\*; but so partial were their views, so bigoted their minds in favour of their own countrymen, that a particular revelation seemed necessary to explain to them the extent of their commission, and dispose them to accept the Gentiles as fellow-heirs. At length, the divine will being manifested in such a manner as to exclude all doubt, the partition wall was broken down: those who had been "aliens from the commonwealth of Israel" were taken into the church of Christ, and admitted to its full privileges.

Cornelius, a Roman centurion, was selected from the Pagan world, as the first instance of this distinguished mercy, and, by the express appointment of Heaven, enrolled among the number of the faithful †. It is in vain for us to demand the reason why he obtained this honourable preference, since God distributes his favours as he pleases; but such was his

\* Matt. xxviii. 19.

† Acts x. 1, &amp;c.

amiable

amiable character before this extraordinary call, that he seemed less likely than many others to excite the prejudices of the Jews. He was a man of integrity and seriousness, under the guidance and renewing influence of the Holy Ghost: his views, indeed, were imperfect and dark, but he walked uprightly, according to the light which faintly glimmered on his path. He had been led, perhaps in a gradual manner, to seek reconciliation with God; and therefore, though ignorant of the particular dispensation revealed in the Gospel, he possessed a previous preparation of mind for its reception. With his convictions and impressions, he could not but be ready to accept the salvation of Christ, when fairly proposed.

In all cases conversion is effected by the agency of God, "from whom all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works, do proceed\*." The very first tendency to real spiritual religion, its beginning, as well as its continuance, progress, and perfection in the soul, must be ascribed to him; "for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do, of his good pleasure †." But the methods of his grace are different with different persons. With some a sudden change is produced; their darkness is almost instantly dispersed; hope and comfort break in upon them; and they soon attain a clear and decisive evidence of their acceptance. But others discover a gradual alteration, and, though seriously disposed and truly devoted to God, remain in much ignorance and perplexity. It may be difficult, for some time, to pronounce concerning their state: yet of this we are assured, that the seed of God implanted in the soul is incorruptible, and will spring up to everlasting life ‡. Whatever delays or obstructions there may be, the final issue will be safe and glorious.

Cornelius, as being uncircumcised, and a "stranger from the covenants of promise," was deemed unclean by the Jews; yet, as we have suggested, he had

\* Second Collect at Evening Prayer.

† Phil. ii. 13.

‡ 1 Pet. i. 23. 1 John iii. 9.

been

been brought under good impressions, and delivered from the foolish and wicked practices of idolatry. Though a Roman soldier, he did not worship the gods of his country; but, in consequence probably of his residence in Judea, he had become acquainted with the Scriptures of the Old Testament, and was led to revere the God of Israel. Even then he is said to have been "a devout man, and one that feared God with all his house." Being sincerely desirous to know and do the will of God, he was strictly attentive to the duties of religion, as far as his information carried him; and, feeling a serious concern for the souls of his domestics, he engaged them in the same holy exercises with himself. He discovered, also, a liberal disposition in relieving the distresses of the poor, as well as a peculiar fervour of mind towards God by the constancy of his prayers. His benevolence and piety were beautifully connected; and they added a lustre to each other. How excellent and lovely the character!

If we truly understand the Christian faith, we have received clearer light, and are laid under stronger obligations; but do we surpass or even imitate the pattern here exhibited? Are we impressed with an awful sense of the majesty of God, and an earnest desire to please him? Do we enforce the principles of religion in our respective habitations, and endeavour to communicate the knowledge which we have attained to those who are immediately subject to our influence? Do we direct and accompany them to the throne of grace? Ah! how many families never associate together, to own their dependence upon God, in their domestic capacity! And is not the neglect disgraceful to the profession of the Gospel?

A serious attention should be paid to different duties, so that all may have their proper place and proportionable regard. While you show a generous solicitude for the souls of others, convince them that you are ready to relieve their bodily necessities. True piety

piety cannot consist with covetousness. If there be any pretenders to devotion, who "shut up their bowels of compassion," they will be condemned by the example of Cornelius, even before he knew the Gospel. Yet, on the other hand, the most liberal contributions to the poor will not compensate the want of godliness. We ask, then, if you "give much alms to the people," what are you offering to God? Are not his claims denied or withheld? Do you "pray always," or seize upon every opportunity to "pour out your heart before him?" You plead, perhaps, your numerous engagements, the peculiar snares and difficulties of your situation, as if they rendered the performance of religious duties impossible. But we refer you to the case of Cornelius, who, though a soldier, in the midst of occupations and connexions extremely unfavourable to every thing of a serious tendency, yet maintained a course of solid and exemplary piety. Your neglect arises not so much from want of opportunity as a secret aversion to the service of God, and therefore you are inexorable.

An improper use of the excellent character before us has been made by some, who deny the necessity of revelation, under the absurd idea that what they call natural religion is sufficient. It is argued, that men, by the light of reason and their own moral powers, may attain to such a state as to want no further information or assistance. But this is a conclusion which the present history does not warrant. Cornelius, probably, as we have intimated, was instructed in the principles of the Jews, and indebted to the sacred writings for all his knowledge of the true God. It is allowed that he was upright, and his goodness conspicuous. But the whole account shows that his righteousness was defective: he was taught to seek remission of his sins through the dispensation of the Gospel and ascribe his acceptance with God to Christ alone. This case, surely, ought not to be ap-

pealed

pealed to by those who would set aside the mediation of the Son of God.

Through the influence of divine grace, Cornelius had been excited to seek the Lord with unfeigned sincerity and devotedness of heart: and persons of such a character shall not be left to perish, or to "grope in the dark without light." He whom they serve will look upon them with gracious regard, compassionate their ignorance, and raise up some instrument or other for their further instruction and advancement. The desires which he hath implanted are pleasing to him; and, though they meet with impediments, they shall not be disappointed.

On a certain day, while the pious centurion was waiting before God with peculiar solemnity, in fasting and prayer, an Angel appeared, to assure him of the favourable notice of Heaven. Cornelius began to tremble upon seeing the bright form stand before him, and hearing himself summoned by name. The celestial messenger, however, encouraged him by an explicit declaration that his acts both of devotion and benevolence were recorded in the divine remembrance, and considered as a decided mark of his sincerity.

This circumstance has been thought to countenance the doctrine of human merit. We allow that it furnishes a powerful inducement to abound in works of piety and mercy, and we would inculcate the performance of them by every scriptural argument. If they are done from truly spiritual motives, they shall not be forgotten before God. But they will not entitle us to the glories of heaven, or procure the remission of our sins. It seems an egregious absurdity to appeal to the New Testament in support of such a scheme as would render the whole system of the Gospel needless and inconsistent. According to that supposition, Cornelius was completely justified by his own obedience; and faith in the Son of God was, to him at least, perfectly unnecessary. Yet it appears from the history that he was directed

directed by the Angel to send for the Apostle Peter, for the express purpose of being instructed in those principles, "whereby he and all his house should be saved\*." This account, surely, does not favour the presumptuous notion of claiming the divine regard as a matter of debt; for it represents the redemption of Christ as indispensably requisite for persons of the most amiable character.

The Angel himself did not explain or declare the nature of salvation. That honour was reserved for one of our fallen race. The Lord has not "committed the word of reconciliation" to those holy spirits, who, as they are not subject to our temptations and infirmities, could not address us, perhaps, with proper feeling and compassion. But it is intrusted to them who stand as much in need of pardoning and sanctifying grace as any of their hearers, and are therefore better qualified to enter into their cases with tenderness, and accommodate themselves to their distresses. Those, however, who would preach Christ with good effect, should be truly acquainted with him, and be able to testify his power and mercy from their own experience. Otherwise they will probably deliver the declarations of the Gospel with as much indifference as if these were not to be depended on, or were of no importance. But, being enriched with all spiritual blessings in Christ Jesus, they will, with a peculiar fervour, commend him, who is the object of their warmest affections, to the notice and acceptance of others. The sacred ministry is of divine institution, and is designed to accomplish, even by weak instruments, the most glorious purposes. It pleases God by this his appointed ordinance to awaken the careless, to instruct the ignorant, to subdue the rebellious to obedience, to produce and increase in his people repentance, faith, hope, love, and joy, through the influence of his Spirit. Let us learn to venerate the function which He hath so highly honoured, and expect from

\* Acts xi. 14.

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it the most solid advantages, while we read that an Angel referred the centurion to St. Peter, to be taught the way of salvation.

Cornelius instantly complied with the heavenly mandate. Having called some of his pious attendants (for such he had engaged in his service), he related the extraordinary vision, and sent them to invite the Apostle to his house. So prejudiced was Peter against the uncircumcised Gentiles, that he would have revolted at the proposal, had not the Lord prepared his mind, and overcome his objections in such a manner as to furnish a sufficient vindication of his conduct even before others. He saw in a trance a miraculous and emblematical representation, by which he learnt that the ceremonial distinctions of clean and unclean were designed to be abolished, and that he ought not to retain any exceptions against those whom God was pleased to receive and sanctify. This occurred just before the messengers arrived; and he was then directed, by an immediate impulse of the Spirit, to accompany them without hesitation.

In the mean time, such was the meek and teachable disposition of the centurion, and such his earnest desire to know the way of God more perfectly, that he waited with much anxiety for the coming of his illustrious teacher. He had also collected his relatives and intimate acquaintance (with whom, it should seem, he improved his influence for the best purposes), that they might share the blessing of Peter's instructions. This circumstance reminds us of what we owe to our near connexions in life. We profess affection, and a readiness to serve them: but how should our friendship appear? Should we not be most solicitous to promote their spiritual and everlasting welfare? For that end, we should endeavour to bring them under the ministry of the Gospel, if we know its value, and expect any advantage from it ourselves. But, while we feel no such concern, and say, as Cain, "Am I my brother's keeper?" we prove that we are destitute of  
true

true benevolence, and ignorant of the unspeakable worth of salvation.

Upon the Apostle's entering the house, Cornelius met him, and by the lowest prostration testified his reverence for the person who came with an express commission to declare the counsel of God. Peter, however, refused the homage, as unsuitable to a mere human being, and then inquired for what purposes they had requested his attendance. The centurion, in reply, related with great simplicity the directions he had received from Heaven, adding, "Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God."

How solemn the occasion! and how amiable the disposition of the pious soldier! He considered himself in the presence of God, and felt an earnest desire to know and do his will, while he stood as an humble scholar to listen to the instructions of the inspired preacher. How much more promising would appearances be among ourselves, if all our congregations, assembled for public worship, possessed the same temper when the ministers of Christ stand forth to declare the truth! Is it not allowed to be our bounden duty to yield an unfeigned regard and unre-served subjection to the revealed word of God, however opposite it may be to our former notions? But with what contemptuous indifference do many sit in our churches! With what pride and petulance do some cavil at every doctrine which suits not their preconceived systems! With what a rebellious obstinacy do others reject those holy precepts, which require their carnal affections to be subdued! Few, therefore, are truly solicitous, like Cornelius, to learn and obey the whole will of God.

St. Peter addressed his attentive audience with solemnity and earnestness. He observed, the present occasion had convinced him that the blessings of the Gospel were not designed to be limited to any people; that, according to this gracious dispensation, as none could obtain favour for any external distinctions or

advantages,

advantages, so none would be excluded from mercy for the want of them; and that, without exception of rank or nation, the Lord receives all those who possess a reverential regard to his majesty, and render unfeigned submission to all his righteous commands. But, lest their imperfect obedience should be considered as the ground of their acceptance, he stated, in a clear and decided manner, the appointed method of justification through the Lord Jesus Christ. The character of the Saviour, his person, work, and offices, his life, death, and resurrection, his coming to judgment, and the attestation of all the prophetic writings to the free forgiveness of sins through faith in his name;—these were the grand topics on which the Apostle insisted. These also are the subjects, which, above all others, are necessary to be understood and kept in our view; and to an honest declaration of them, in every age of the church, the divine blessing is promised.

Cornelius and his company listened with fixed attention: and, while they gladly received the record which God gave of his Son, the Holy Ghost descended, probably with some external manifestations of his power, confirmed the truth of the word, and accompanied it with an efficacious influence to the hearers. They were endued with such miraculous powers as might qualify them to be witnesses and preachers of the Gospel. They spake in languages which they had never learnt, and with ardent gratitude proclaimed the sovereign and distinguishing mercy of the Lord. When He had thus evidently accepted them, his people could not refuse to admit them into their communion. They were all, therefore, taken into the society of believers, by the initiating rite of baptism; they made an open profession of attachment to Christ, and solemnly dedicated themselves to his service. Nothing more is related concerning them, but that they requested the continuance of Peter a few days longer, being desirous to enjoy some further benefit from his ministry, to be established, edified, and comforted

comforted in their holy faith. Those who know the worth of the Gospel will esteem and solicit the company and conversation of such as are more advanced in grace, and are able to communicate the most salutary instructions. But, when connexions of this sort are disregarded, it is obvious that the truth and ways of God are not properly esteemed.

Probably the centurion retained his situation in the Roman army: at least he was not commanded to relinquish it; nor is the occupation of a soldier any where condemned in the Scriptures as absolutely sinful in itself. It was indeed unfavourable to pure religion, yet perhaps it furnished him with opportunities of doing extensive good. The apostolical direction is, "Let every man, wherein he is called, therein abide with God \*." It is possible that a good conscience may require us to abandon our post, but let us not quit it merely to avoid difficulties. Rather let us inquire, if, by a faithful and honourable discharge of our duty, we may not glorify God and benefit our fellow-creatures. We may expect peculiar support in the place to which we are appointed; and, perhaps, we are not qualified for any other.

Whatever we may be disposed to think of the state of Cornelius towards God before his extraordinary call, it is evident that the Scriptures describe this call as a dispensation of peculiar mercy, from which both he and others received singular advantages. If he had previously obtained acceptance, he was then taught that he owed it entirely to the interposition of the Lord Jesus Christ: and doubtless the clear discovery of redemption tended to fill his soul with peace and joy, and to excite him to higher degrees of holiness. Nothing, therefore, can be concluded from the case before us to the disparagement of the Gospel: nay, rather, we may here perceive the blessed fruits of the Saviour's mediation, and in this view should say, with the Apostles,

has, *habebis, habebis* \* 1 Cor. vii. 24.

"Then

"Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life \*," and "purified their hearts by faith †." May we be encouraged to seek for a participation of the same grace!

A public testimony was now given that in the church of Christ the distinctions between Jew and Greek, bond and free, male and female, are done away, and that believers "are all one in Christ Jesus ‡." And, "if we be Christ's," it matters not from what parentage we are descended, "we are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." The door of mercy continues open, and we are authorized to exhort all, without respect of persons, that they earnestly solicit an admission. The same blessing which Peter proposed to Cornelius is still offered to us: it is ours also to hear of remission of sins through faith in the Son of God. It is generally allowed that notorious offenders stand in need of it; nor should we hesitate to tender it in the fullest manner to the most abandoned. But some appear to reject it with disdain, as if, on account of their amiable temper and moral character, it were unnecessary for them to seek redemption through the blood of the cross. Alas! they deceive themselves. If they be as exemplary as Cornelius, which perhaps may be doubted, yet this case will teach them to place a high value upon the salvation exhibited in the Gospel, and will condemn their proud contempt of this mercy.

To men of all characters the good tidings are addressed. The Lord Christ is preached unto us for the forgiveness of sins. Is not this the blessing which is indispensably requisite? Then let us obey the great evangelical precept without cavilling, and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, as having made peace for us. So will the word of God come unto us, as it did to Cornelius, "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power." The Holy Ghost is not now communicated in those extraordinary operations which

\* Acts xi. 18. † xv. 9. ‡ Gal. iii. 28, 29.

were

were once expedient; but he descends, as certainly as he did in the primitive ages, on all who cordially accept the message of grace. He enlightens, sanctifies, and comforts them, and thus gives them an unquestionable evidence that they have not "believed a lie." Let us look up in fervent prayer for this efficacious influence, that he may accomplish in us "all the good pleasure of his goodness." Then, like the devout centurion, we shall shout aloud for joy, whilst we magnify God for his mercy, and celebrate the praises of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

HEROD

## HEROD AGRIPPA.

## CHAP. XI.

*Herod persecuted the church—killed James—imprisoned Peter—was disappointed by that Apostle's miraculous escape—flattered, as if he were a deity—suddenly destroyed for his pride.*

THE faithful followers of Christ, though called to maintain a severe warfare against an evil world, are not every moment engaged in actual conflict. For gracious purposes they may be at certain times exempted from all external disturbances, and permitted to enjoy a state of ease and prosperity. "The Lord maketh even their enemies to be at peace with them\*." Such a season occurred after the conversion of St. Paul. Perhaps some of the violent opposers of the Gospel were discouraged when they saw so bold a champion desert them. "Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea, and Galilee, and Samaria, and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied †." At length, however, a furious persecutor arose, and threatened them with terrible devastation. The result indeed was, that he was suddenly cut down by the hand of God, whom he had provoked, yet for a while he was suffered to show the malignity of his heart, for the vindication of the stroke of the Avenger.

The contemplation of such characters may excite many painful sensations, but suggests profitable reflections. We shall here perceive that our depraved nature is filled with enmity against God and his peo-

\* Prov. xvi. 7.

† Acts ix. 31.

ple; that the fiercest adversaries of the truth are not to be dreaded or envied, in the height of all their pomp and power; and that their triumphing is short. We shall learn also, from the instance before us, to fear before that holy Lord God, who is jealous of his honour, and whose anger is tremendous when he ariseth to take vengeance.

The person now introduced to our notice is Herod, surnamed Agrippa, grandson of that Herod who massacred the children at Beth-lehem, nephew to him who murdered John the Baptist, and the father of that prince who was "almost persuaded to be a Christian." He was the king of Judea, which he governed as a Roman province. He is said to have been zealous for the religion of the Jews: but perhaps he professed it only with a view of conciliating their favour; at least, he showed in his general conduct a fondness for popularity. His avowed opposition to the Gospel may in some degree be ascribed to that principle, whilst it is obvious, from the haughtiness of spirit which he possessed, that he must himself have been totally averse to the humbling doctrines of our religion.

"Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church\*." We lament that power should ever be exercised for such purposes; and that they, who are appointed for the "punishment of evil-doers," should exert their authority to harass and destroy them that do well. The flock of Christ was the object of this tyrant's indignation: he regarded not their inoffensive and benevolent disposition, but, like a ravenous wolf, sought to scatter and devour them; and they, like defenceless sheep, were obliged to fly, or were doomed to the slaughter. They were afflicted in different ways, not by reproach and contempt alone, or by the deprivation of their worldly substance, but by imprisonment, tortures, and death. It should seem that their religion was their only offence, and the true cause of that malig-

\* Acts xii. 1, &c.

nity

nity with which they were treated. Christians may be guilty of imprudence and misconduct: but it is their attachment to their divine Master which principally excites persecution against them. Thus Jesus declared, "If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you\*."

Probably many persons in a private situation fell under Herod's resentment; but these were not of consequence enough to satiate his fury. He turned his hand against some of the leading characters in the church, and, of course, the Apostles were first marked out for destruction. James, the brother of John, was seized and slain with the sword: thus he, who had been so dear to Jesus, soon finished his labours, and, the first of the twelve, received the crown of martyrdom. The loss of so valuable a life, when Christianity stood in need of every support, was an afflicting dispensation. But, perhaps, the violence and cruelty of the oppressor, instead of checking, promoted the progress of the Gospel. Did it not appear more glorious through St. James's readiness to suffer in its defence, and through the subsequent perseverance of his associates in the ministry, who continued to despise the menaces of their enraged persecutors? The Jews, however, felt themselves gratified by the king's sanguinary conduct, and probably flattered him for the fervour of his religious zeal. With a view, therefore, to recommend himself and his administration, he proceeded to further acts of severity against the Christians. Alas! to what lengths of folly and wickedness have men been hurried by a fondness for vain applause! Let us beware of indulging a passion which is of so destructive a tendency.

The assiduous and unwearied exertions of St. Peter in propagating the truth rendered him particularly obnoxious. Accordingly, the tyrant marked him

\* John xv. 19.



out for the next victim, apprehended and imprisoned him. It was intended that his death should be a public exhibition, as a sight which would afford peculiar pleasure to the people. But the celebration of the passover interfered with the execution. These murderers were exact in their ceremonial observances, like the murderers of Jesus, who, while they contrived his crucifixion, paid a scrupulous attention to the holy feast. It was decreed, therefore, that the Apostle should be brought forth to suffer at the conclusion of the solemnity. But his hour was not then come. Whatever our enemies may threaten, we possess an infallible security under the care and protection of our Almighty Lord, so long as he shall please to employ us in his service, or retain us in our appointed post. Let us leave to him the determination of every event, and be solicitous, not so much to escape the hand of violence, as to answer some useful purpose, "whether it be by life or by death."

Herod, determined to make sure of his prisoner, not only kept him in close confinement, but committed him to the custody of four quaternions of soldiers, lest a rescue or an escape should be attempted. But no strength or contrivance can prevail against the counsel of the Lord. If He should say, "Go forth," no gates or chains, nor even all the armed force of the most potent monarch, can hold one weak defenceless saint in bondage. The incessant prayers of the church, which were offered up for the Apostle, procured the divine interposition for his release, and effectually defeated the king's intention. "The Lord sent his Angel, and delivered Peter out of the hand of Herod, and from all the expectation of the Jews." Yet his miraculous preservation was delayed till within a few hours of the time appointed for his execution. On this account it was the more conspicuous, and calculated to recommend the Gospel to the favourable notice, at least to restrain the fury, of its adversaries. God, as it were, publicly declared the cause of the prisoner

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to be his own, and all who paid any serious attention to that testimony must have perceived that opposition was vain, foolish, and wicked. Who shall presume to fight against Him?

The multitude were disappointed of the entertainment which had been promised them in the tortures and death of the Apostle. The bloody persecutor commanded diligent search to be made for his intended victim; but Peter was secured from his rage: the Lord concealed him as he had done Baruch and Jeremiah on a similar occasion\*. Thus the pride of the tyrant was mortified when he found himself robbed of his prey; but his heart refused to be humbled. He ought to have confessed his own iniquity for having designed to take away an innocent life. But, alas! in what numerous instances are we constrained to remark the blindness and obduracy of men in a state of impenitence! "Lord, when thy hand is lifted up, they will not see;" they will not believe or regard the manifest interpositions of Heaven: but the time is coming when "they shall see, and be ashamed for their envy at the people †." Whatever might be Herod's view of the matter, he doubtless wished to discredit the miracle, and prevent its influence upon the public mind. He slew the guards, to whose care Peter was committed, that the escape of the prisoner might be ascribed to their negligence. It has been a common device with the enemies of Christianity to spread false reports, and give a wrong statement of real facts, in order to prejudice others, and obviate the probable effect of the truth. We should therefore be afraid of listening to any misrepresentations of the religion of the Gospel. Let us examine with strict impartiality, and judge with the most serious deliberation. We shall be inexcusable if through inattention we suffer ourselves to be imposed on, and tricked out of our salvation, "by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive ‡."

\* Jer. xxxvi. 26.

† Isa. xxvi. 11.

‡ Eph. iv. 14.

Perhaps

Perhaps Herod declined all further persecution of the church: but the cries of them whom he had oppressed "entered into the ears of the Lord of sabaoth." The blood which he had shed, and that also which he had designed to shed, demanded vengeance against him. Yet he was spared for some time. God is patient and exerciseth much forbearance towards his enemies. Why else is not the common course of events obstructed, and the world itself destroyed? Considering the daring provocations of his creatures, we may wonder that He doth not make bare his arm, and consume them in his anger. But his justice will strike at the last. "If the wicked turn not, He will whet his sword; he hath bent his bow, and made it ready. He hath also prepared for him the instruments of death; he ordaineth his arrows against the persecutors \*."

Herod removed from Jerusalem to Cesarea, to celebrate certain games, as Josephus reports, in honour of the Roman emperor. Here we shall behold him at one moment in a state of high dignity and glory, at another debased even to the dust. During his residence at Cesarea, the Tyrians and Sidonians, whom he had threatened with war for some offence, sent a deputation to him, professing submission, and deprecating his anger. Through the influence of the king's chamberlain, they obtained the desired reconciliation; and the plan of hostilities was relinquished. But Herod, for the gratification of his own excessive vanity by a pompous display of his greatness, gave a public audience to the ambassadors, and endeavoured to impress them with an idea of his abilities, magnificence, and power. He had provided for the purpose a splendid robe of richest texture, which, according to Josephus, was so exquisitely wrought with silver, that, when the sun shone upon it, the eyes of spectators were dazzled. Thus arrayed, he entered the crowded theatre, and seated himself upon a

\* Psal. vii. 12, 13.

throne

throne of state, desirous to attract the general notice, admiration, and applause.

He exhibited all the grandeur of his majesty, and it should seem that he was also ostentatious of his eloquence. He addressed the assembly in a speech prepared for the occasion, the purport of which was, most probably, to celebrate his own power and clemency before the gazing multitude. They were not backward to pay him the deference he wished for. They might be struck with a pleasing astonishment, or, perceiving his design, were disposed to gratify his pride by expressions of gross adulation. They gave a shout, declaring their high admiration; and, as if they were ready to exalt him above the rank of mortals, by giving him divine honours, they cried out, "It is the voice of a god, and not of a man." This was profane language indeed, and the more so as many of the company had been instructed to worship none but Jehovah. The king himself was sufficiently acquainted with the sacred Scriptures to be convinced that such adoration was impious in the extreme, and he ought to have rejected it with abhorrence. But he was evidently delighted, and, being elated with vanity, consented to receive that homage which should be paid only to our Almighty Creator. "He gave not God the glory:" he did not refer the people to Him; and, as if he forgot his own entire dependence, acknowledged not his obligations to the sovereign Lord of all, for the distinguished eminence to which he was raised.

Such was Herod; set up as something more than human, revered as a deity by flattering parasites, and foolish enough to be pleased with their idolatrous oblations of praise. The absurdity as well as wickedness of the king in this transaction may surprise us; but we shall cease to wonder if we seriously attend to the state of our fallen nature. Pride is most unsuitable to us as creatures and sinners; yet, though "not made for men," it is interwoven in our very frame. We are not unwilling to be extolled for ex-

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cellencies which we do not possess; we wish to renounce our subjection to Him who made us, and claim a consequence and respect which are due only to Divinity itself. There are peculiar snares and dangers attendant on persons in an elevated rank: they are more especially liable to be puffed up with a conceit of their own importance. "Man, being in honour," not only "abideth not," but "is like the beasts that perish\*." Such a situation too often stupifies the mind, and renders it incapable of proper discernment; and then he, who is the object of general admiration and applause, is not himself, and cannot make a fair estimate of things. Or, like the brute animals, he is engrossed with such matters as are immediately within his view, to the neglect and contempt of such as are remote. Accordingly, the history of mankind will furnish many instances of those, who, having risen to great power, claimed and received titles and professions of homage, which are the unalienable and exclusive right of the Lord Almighty. Let none among ourselves presume that we, if placed in eminent stations, should be secured from such effects. Let us all, rather, suspect our own hearts, and pray earnestly that God may subdue our natural vanity, and keep us humble under a sense of our insignificance, weakness, and depravity.

An exemplary punishment was inflicted on the haughty king. In the midst of all his splendour, while he was elated with the notion of his own superior excellence, as if he were a god, he felt a mortifying conviction, and exhibited a melancholy proof, of his helplessness and mortality. He was instantly seized with excruciating pains, forced to confess his folly and wretchedness to his idolatrous admirers, and, after a few days of extreme suffering, became a loathsome corpse. Many learned solutions, probably, may be given, and physical reasons assigned, for his extraordinary death. But St. Luke, the sacred historian, though himself a physician, ascribes it solely

\* Psal. xlix. 12.

to the immediate vengeance of Heaven: "the Angel of the Lord smote him." We ask not for any other explanation; and we lament that so many seem determined to ascribe every event to natural principles and second causes, unwilling to acknowledge the first great Cause of all, or to allow the God of nature any influence in the government of the universe.

The visitation of God in this case was the more remarkable, as it followed immediately upon the sin which had provoked his anger. "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil\*." But here justice overtook the offender with swift steps, and exhibited him to public view, even in the moment of his highest exaltation and triumph, as a signal instance of the divine vengeance against pride and persecution. Thus, while Nebuchadnezzar boastingly exclaimed, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom, by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?" there fell a voice from heaven, saying, "The kingdom is departed from thee †." Belshazzar, also, in the very act of "lifting up himself against the Lord of heaven," was confounded by the hand-writing, which declared, that, being weighed in the balances, and found wanting, he should soon be deprived of his dominion ‡.

The particular nature of Herod's punishment seems designed to show the odiousness of his sin. He was presumptuously elated, and therefore God determined to reduce him to the lowest state of abasement. As he received with complacency the impious adulations of the people, and probably indulged the conceit that he was advanced above the lot of humanity, he became a weak and defenceless prey to the meanest and most loathsome vermin. "He was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost." Bred in the putrefaction which seized his frame, they

\* Eccles. viii. 11. † Dan. iv. 30, 31. ‡ 1. v. 22—28.

suddenly attacked his vitals, and rendered him an object of misery and abhorrence. Who could then envy or admire his splendour and greatness? Who could any longer bow the knee to worship him? He cried out in the anguish of his heart; his pampered body was soon turned into corruption; and all his pomp and dignity were laid in the dust.

"Lord, what is man!" "Verily, at his best estate, he is altogether vanity\*." His mental faculties, glorious and excellent as they are, afford no ground for boasting, since in a moment they may be impaired or deranged. His outward form may be comely, but it is a short-lived flower, and may be instantly blasted in the height of its gaiety. "When thou, Lord, with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity, thou makest his beauty to consume away like a moth: surely every man is vanity †." Let those who pride themselves in a vigorous constitution, a graceful person, or an eloquent address, contemplate the case of Herod, and be ashamed of their foolish ostentation. Can you bear to be told that not only shall worms devour your flesh in the grave, but possibly those loathsome creatures may receive a commission against you, and render you, in your most prosperous state upon earth, a terror to yourselves and others? O, seek for something better than any of those decorations or accomplishments, of which you may be so soon deprived! The grace of Jesus is a sure and never-failing treasure to the sincere believer. O, labour to obtain the "one thing needful!" It is "that good part which shall not be taken away ‡."

This history will teach us to be thankful for the outward peace and security which the church of Christ, established among us, now enjoys. The religious privileges afforded us in this country are singularly great. Let us praise God that we are the subjects, not of a furious and persecuting tyrant, but of "a nursing father" to our Zion. Let us give

\* Psal. xliv. 3. xxxix. 5. † Psal. xxxix. 11. ‡ Luke x. 42.  
diligence

diligence to improve our inestimable advantages to good purpose, and be afraid lest our negligence or discontent should provoke God to withdraw them.

Yet those who "suffer for righteousness' sake" have no real cause to dread their most violent and powerful opposers. The strength of your enemies, when exerted against the cause of God, is feeble and contemptible. While we refer you to Herod, we ask, "Who art thou, that thou shouldest be afraid of a man that shall die, and of the son of man, which shall be made as grass?—and hast feared continually every day because of the fury of the oppressor, as if he were ready to destroy? And where is the fury of the oppressor\*?" The Lord will surely maintain his own truth; and perhaps the persecution, which appears most formidable, may eventually promote its advancement. Herod, who "stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church," was cut down; "but the word of God grew and multiplied." O learn to trust your concerns with your faithful and Almighty Protector! "Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee †." "No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn ‡."

From the character and tremendous punishment of Herod a suitable occasion is given to warn others of his spirit and conduct. Many in private life are disposed to deride and oppress those who appear zealous for the faith and practice of the Gospel. We would argue with them concerning the unreasonableness and danger of their opposition, and ask, Who are you, that you should wish to direct another man's conscience? Whatever influence or authority you possess, presume not to set yourselves up in the place of the supreme Judge, or to usurp dominion "over God's heritage." Your persecution is as foolish as it is base. It may, probably, deter hypo-

\* Isa. li. 12, 13. † xii. 6. ‡ liv. 17.

crites, but it will render sincere believers more firm and courageous in their profession. They who truly understand the worth of Christ and his salvation will not desert his service on account of the difficulties which you may throw in their way. Yet, while you are endeavouring to keep men in ignorance and sin, the tendency of your conduct is to deceive and ruin their immortal souls; and in this view you must be ranked amongst robbers and assassins of the most heinous kind. If you consider, likewise, that your opposition is in fact levelled against God himself, your guilt will appear peculiarly enormous. You exert your influence to prevent a due subjection to his authority, and therefore you are promoting rebellion in his government. And do you not tremble for the consequence? He will assuredly reckon with you for your profane derision of his word, and injurious treatment of his people. Perhaps you may be made, like Herod, a monument of vengeance; for we have heard of many similar cases. At least, the time is coming, when, if you repent not, Jehovah "will speak unto you in his wrath, and vex you in his sore displeasure \*."

We caution our readers, also, to beware of that haughtiness of spirit which the king of Judea betrayed. "God resisteth the proud," and determines that "they shall be abased." Yet are we not all, in one respect or another, chargeable with this sin? Has it not been our aim and study to display ourselves, our abilities, possessions, or performances, in an ostentatious manner? Have we not claimed the credit, and refused to "give God the glory?" There is no superiority, mental or corporeal, which we can enjoy, but pride will find in it occasion of boasting and triumph. We are continually in danger of exalting the creature, to the neglect of the Creator. O, let us look with a holy jealousy on our most admired advantages; for, whatever they may be, if God be not acknowledged and served in them, they

\* Psal. ii. 5.

will!

will prove the means of aggravated guilt and everlasting destruction!

How many are cut down, like Herod, in the midst of their vanity and profaneness! Do not the frequent instances of the sudden deaths of profligate offenders excite an alarm amongst us? We entreat the attention of the careless and impenitent to this tremendous subject. Any other sin, as well as those which appeared in the character before us, will, if persisted in, expose you to the fierce anger of Almighty God. His hand is lifted up; and, perhaps, he may shortly strike the fatal blow. What, then, is your hope, "when God taketh away your soul \*?" Ah! "where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear †?" The acute disease by which Herod perished was only an omen and warning of that infinitely more terrible misery which awaited him. "He was eaten of worms:" but there is a worm "which dieth not," and which will be for ever gnawing the consciences of them "that obey not the Gospel of God." Is not this more than you can bear to think of? Yet remember it is decreed, that, "though hand join in hand, the wicked shall not be unpunished ‡." And, perhaps, the irrevocable sentence may instantly go forth, "This night thy soul shall be required of thee §." O, seek forgiveness by the blood of the cross! Seek the renovation of your hearts in righteousness, by the grace of the Spirit! "To-day, if ye will hear the voice of God, harden not your hearts ||." Submit to him without reserve, and you shall know that He, who is terrible in his anger, "delighteth in mercy. He will subdue your iniquities, and cast all your sins into the depths of the sea ¶."

\* Job xxvii. 8.

† 1 Pet. iv. 18.

‡ Prov. xi. 21.

§ Luke xii. 20.

|| Heb. iv. 7.

¶ Mic. vii. 18, 19.

## ONESIMUS.

## CHAP. XII.

*Onesimus, the servant of Philemon—robbed his master—fled to Rome—there converted through St. Paul's ministry—returned to his master with the Apostle's recommendation—was affectionately received by the church as a brother—and probably admitted into the sacred ministry.*

**WHILE** we are considering the characters of men we ought to perceive and admire the glory and perfections of God in his conduct towards them. The government which he exercises over our fallen race exhibits an astonishing view of his love, no less than of his power. Such a view is given us in every instance of the conversion of a sinner. Cases of this nature are always to be regarded as events of peculiar magnitude. They discover the exceeding greatness of that grace which can pardon and sanctify the rebellious; and therefore, as far as they are made known to us, demand our serious attention.

The person who is here proposed as the subject of our meditations claims our notice on this ground. The sacred volume, indeed, does not contain a large account; but the few circumstances recorded of him will furnish us with important instruction. He had been placed in a mean situation, and his conduct had been infamous; but, the doctrine of the cross having reached his heart with a mighty energy, he became an honourable and useful member both of society and of the church of God. May we, like the holy angels, rejoice over the repenting sinner! May we contemplate the change with gratitude and delight, and prove

by

by our future obedience that we have obtained the same mercy!

Onesimus was no more than a common slave, but probably did not feel the hardships generally attendant on such a condition; and he was favoured with opportunities of gaining religious knowledge and improvement. His master Philemon professed and adorned the Gospel, having a church in his house, and being distinguished for his "love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and toward all saints." It should seem, also, that he was a faithful preacher, for St. Paul addresses him as his "dearly beloved and fellow labourer\*." The meanest servant, in such a pious family, doubtless enjoyed peculiar advantages of a spiritual kind. But no external means can change the heart. Onesimus retained his situation without any apparent benefit from the prayers, instructions, admonitions, or example of his excellent master; and on this account his guilt was more highly aggravated. To continue careless and impenitent, under the constant observation of the efficacious and happy influence of real religion, manifests the deepest depravity; it implies more than gross ignorance, an avowed contempt and rejection of God and his truth.

O consider, if you are the members of such a household as that of Philemon, What improvement are you making of the valuable opportunities afforded you? Have you not yet to learn the way of righteousness, though you have long been taught? Do you not neglect your souls, though continually warned of your danger? You are summoned to the worship of God, both at church and at home: but do you not still remain strangers to prayer? What account, then, shall you be able to give? Should you die in unbelief, your masters and parents, whose exhortations you have despised, will witness against you: and that situation, which might have proved an inestimable blessing, will eventually be your heaviest curse.

\* Philem. 1, &c.

Onesimus

Onesimus was not merely thoughtless, but destitute of all principles of probity. He betrayed his trust in Philemon's service, and then absconded with the pilfered property. Is the heinousness of dishonesty sufficiently considered? Are you, to whom the concerns of others are committed, strictly attentive to your obligations? Do you hate robbery, even in the smallest degree? And are all your transactions such as you could bear to produce to the public view? O, remember there is a God in heaven, who narrowly inspects your private dealings, and will expose every fraudulent practice at the day of judgment. Will not this be to your unspeakable confusion? Determine, then, to suffer any difficulties, rather than waste or embezzle what is deposited with you. Let "no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because the Lord is the avenger of all such \*."

From this view of Onesimus's state and conduct we should have apprehended every thing bad; and had he received the just recompense of his iniquity, or been left to follow, without restraint, the devices of his own heart, the consequence must have been fatal. But a different scene opens upon us; and we turn from the profligacy of the sinner, to behold the rich and sovereign grace of our God in Jesus Christ.

Onesimus, having basely deserted his master, probably became a wanderer and a vagabond. In that state, under the controlling influence of divine Providence, his steps were directed to Rome; and there, by some means or other, he was brought under the ministry of St Paul, who, though a prisoner, was permitted to preach the Gospel in his own house. What were Onesimus's motives for attending the Apostle we know not; but the event was blessed. The wretched rambler was suddenly arrested; an arrow of conviction from the Lord pierced his heart; he confessed his guilt, and obtained mercy through that Saviour, of whom he then heard. A total renovation took place within him: he "renounced the

\* 1. Thess. iv. 6.

hidden

hidden things of dishonesty," and desired to serve God in righteousness and true holiness. He was more than reformed; he was made "a new creature." This, said Paul, is "my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds."

Here, then, is a striking instance and undeniable proof of the extensiveness and power of that grace which God has exhibited in the Gospel. He can save those whose cases to us appear desperate. He can pardon the most aggravated sins, and wash away stains of the deepest die. He can turn the most obdurate rebel into a faithful subject. Accumulated offences, and confirmed habits of wickedness, are no obstruction to the exercise of his mercy and the influence of his Spirit on those whom He is pleased to visit with his salvation. On this ground we may be encouraged to entertain a pleasing hope for others, and to offer importunate supplications for ourselves.

Some are disposed to ask, Why does the Lord permit the objects of his choice to proceed so far and continue so long in their evil courses? Why does he not prevent the mischief which they bring upon themselves and their connexions? "Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God \*?" Instead of giving way to curious inquiries and presumptuous cavillings concerning his dispensations, we should rather bow before him with unfeigned humility, and confess that we have no right to question the wisdom or the equity of his proceedings. Many of his reasons are concealed from us; but that part of his conduct which he has condescended to explain demands our admiration, love, and praise; and, even when his appointments appear to us strange and unaccountable, we should rest assured that He doeth all things well. At the last day it will be incontestably demonstrated that "the Lord is righteous in all his ways, and holy in all his works †."

We grant that He suffers men for whom he has "thoughts of peace and not of evil" to gratify their

\* Rom. ix. 20.

† Psal. cxlv. 17.

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own perverse desires, and make a daring progress in wickedness. Thus he takes occasion to humble them more effectually, after they have given full proof of their depravity by their atrocious conduct. He exhibits in a more conspicuous light the sovereignty of his mercy, while he convinces them by their own experience that they deserve to perish, even as others, and that they are indebted to His almighty grace for the salutary change which is produced. It is observable, too, that persons of this description, when they have embraced the Gospel, generally possess a stronger and livelier sense of the value of redemption, and their obligations to the Saviour, than those who have not run into the same irregularities. They feel the more fervent love, as being more deeply impressed with the persuasion that they have much forgiven\*. Are there not evident marks of the divine wisdom and goodness in this procedure? We confess, however, that the subject involves difficulties which we pretend not to explain; and we caution our readers to suspect their own reasonings and conclusions which are not expressly warranted by the Scriptures. While we maintain and rejoice in the full liberty of the Gospel, let us beware of abusing it to the purposes of licentiousness. "Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.—What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid †." We reject such an inference with abhorrence.

It is the high prerogative of Him, "who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will ‡," to bring good out of evil, and to glorify himself even by the disobedience of his creatures: yet this does not in any measure palliate their guilt. The wickedness of Joseph's brethren, in conspiring against him and selling him into Egypt, was eventually the means of great and numerous advantages, and designed to be so by the divine appointment. But, as they acted

\* Luke vii. 47. † Rom. v. 20. vi. 1, 2. ‡ Eph. i. 11.  
from

from the basest motives, they were perfectly inexcusable. "Ye thought evil against me," said Joseph, "but God meant it unto good\*." It pleased the Lord, likewise, to render the dishonesty of Onesimus, though truly detestable, subservient to the most gracious purposes. This, at least, led the way to his conversion; and who shall say that it was not permitted, in order to fix upon his heart a deep conviction of his depravity? What else could be the sense of the Apostle when he observed to Philemon, "Perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldst receive him for ever?" This gives us an astonishing view of the dispensations of God. He preserves his own holiness; and yet the very sins which are most hateful to him form a part of his plan, inasmuch as he intends to make use of them, in various instances, for the recovery of the offenders. They follow their own perverse inclinations, whilst he secretly conducts them to those places and connexions in which a blessing awaits them. These cases frequently occur; but many of them, at present, may be wisely concealed from public view, since men of corrupt minds would thence take occasion to blaspheme the truth, and harden themselves in their iniquity. But hereafter they will all be displayed, and furnish the redeemed of the Lord with additional reasons for admiring, loving, and praising Him throughout eternity.

Such also is the sovereign providence of God, that he can never be at a loss for means to accomplish his own purposes. He "waits to be gracious," and sends repeated calls and offers of mercy to those who persist in their rebellion. Yet he is not, he cannot be, disappointed: if one method fails for reducing them to obedience, another is at hand. Onesimus fled from the admonitions of his pious master, but in his flight, though this was no part of his intention, he came under the ministry of St. Paul, and there received the blessing of a new heart. The Lord God,

\* Gen. i. 20.

though



though not confined in his agency, generally honours the ordinances of his own appointment; and, while men seek to evade those exhortations which are painful to them, he is often pleased to bring them under the sound of his word in a different situation, and to produce in them such a change as they neither expected nor desired. But, by whatever instrument a spiritual renovation is effected, the whole glory should be ascribed to Him, "who worketh all in all\*."

This is not a subject of mere speculation. Conversion extends not to the judgment only, but to the inward principles and tempers, and will appear in the outward conduct. In some instances sufficient time may not be allowed to give a public and decisive proof of its reality. We do not assert that in these cases there is no evidence to be depended on, but none of that sort which we are authorized to require as indispensably necessary, where life is spared, and opportunities of doing good are afforded. "This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk †." "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven ‡."

St. Paul without hesitation pronounced Onesimus a convert; and doubtless the change was evinced to his satisfaction. The poor fugitive slave felt a deep conviction of his guilt, and especially of the theft which he had committed. He opened his distress, and made a frank confession to the Apostle, that through him he might implore forgiveness from his much-injured master. Repentance is always accompanied with a painful remembrance of sin, a sense of its evil, and a readiness to acknowledge both to God and men every wrong which we have done. If the mischief which we have occasioned cannot be repaired, yet we should prove our godly sorrow by an honest and unreserved declaration of our baseness.

\* 1 Cor. xii. 6.

† Eph. iv. 17.

‡ Matt. v. 16.

An anxious endeavour to deny or conceal, to justify or palliate our misconduct, will give sufficient ground for suspecting an unsoundness of heart.

Onesimus was willing to return to the post which he had so shamefully deserted, and desirous, by a strict attention to his duty, to be useful to that honourable person who had suffered through his former treachery. This was a favourable sign. It ought never to be forgotten that true religion will direct our regard to the respective places in life which we have forsaken or neglected, and dispose us to discharge our appointed offices for the benefit of those to whom we have been injurious. The sincere penitent will inquire, How may I serve and glorify God in my situation? How may I now fulfil those obligations which I have basely violated in time past? I have wronged and grieved my nearest connexions, my parents or master, my children or servants: in what way may I now be enabled to promote their advantage and comfort? But those who feel no such concern about their future conduct, who are not solicitous to answer some more profitable purpose than they have already done, know not the grace of God in truth: their religion is vain.

In order to probe the wound more perfectly, we observe, that, if your consciences be distressed by the recollection of any trespass or injury which you have committed, you must endeavour to make reparation according to the utmost of your ability. If you refuse this, your professions of penitence are hypocritical. Onesimus probably could not restore to Philemon what he had stolen; but he acknowledged his obligation to do it. St. Paul admitted the demands of the master, and, taking the obligation of the servant upon himself, expressly confirmed the intentions and the duty of his convert. Thus the Apostle writes, "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account: I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it."

Onesimus, having obtained forgiveness with God,

was cordially received by the church, and from that time held in considerable reputation. St. Paul commends him to the notice of the Colossians as "a faithful and beloved brother, who was one of them\*." And ecclesiastical history relates that he was afterwards admitted into the sacred ministry, and laboured diligently for the conversion of others. What an astonishing and happy change then was here accomplished! How excellent is that system of faith which is calculated to produce these glorious effects! "Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir-tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle-tree: and it shall be to the Lord for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off †." After such a representation it will not surely be objected that the doctrines of the Gospel are of a licentious tendency. Through the gracious provision which God has made in Jesus Christ, there is free and plenteous redemption for those who have been most abandoned in principle and conduct. But, consistently with this truth, we maintain, that those, whom the Lord pardons, He also sanctifies, and that believers must prove their sincerity by abounding in all the fruits of righteousness. Do we not then effectually secure the interests of morality and holiness?

Some, perhaps, object to the kindness and cordiality with which such converts are usually received among Christians: but this very circumstance, which excites disgust, displays the strong influence of our religion. If there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over repenting sinners ‡, shall not the saints on earth participate of the same generous affection and disinterested pleasure? Shall not all who love the Lord show the tenderest regard for those who are reconciled to him, without exception of rank, or even of their former character? If he vouchsafe to admit them into his family as his sons and daughters, who are we, that we should treat them with contempt or neglect? The grace of God

\* Col. iv. 9.

† Isa. lv. 13.

‡ Luke xv. 10.

will

will teach us that "we were by nature the children of wrath, even as others\*," and dispose us to love all those as brethren who appear to be renewed by the same spirit. "It is meet that we should make merry and be glad: for this our brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found †."

Paul, though an Apostle, rejoiced over Onesimus, who was no better than a poor slave, and whose conduct had been infamous. He did not urge against him his mean condition, or his atrocious crimes; but, believing him to be born of God, he embraced him as a fellow-heir, earnestly interceded for him with Philemon, and with the overflowings of parental affection exulted in him as his own child. Do we not feel very forcibly our obligations to Christian love, while we observe with what tenderness and fervour St. Paul commends this young convert to the favourable notice of his master: "I beseech thee," says he, "for my son Onesimus;—thou therefore receive him that is mine own bowels;—not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord! If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself." Probably Philemon complied with the request in its full extent, pardoned the returning slave; treated him with affectionate regard, and rejoiced at the change. Let us likewise learn to lay aside our envious resentments, and, without adverting to past circumstances, if only we are now united together in the bonds of the covenant, and "called in one hope of our calling," let us, as brethren of the same Father, "love one another with a pure heart fervently."

But, while we contend for the exercise of an enlarged benevolence towards all Christians, we maintain that the Gospel does not reduce the different ranks and orders of society to a level, nay, rather that it requires the observance of those distinctions.

\* Eph. ii. 3.

† Luke xv. 62.

Onesimus

Onesimus might possibly resume his post in Philemon's household, and yet be treated, on a spiritual account, "not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved." This spiritual regard we may pay to our pious labourers and meanest dependents, as the children of God, and the heirs of glory, while we continue to insist on their subjection and obedience. We lament the forwardness of some, who seem to think they are exempted from subordination, in consequence of their religious knowledge and attainments. They obtrude themselves with a degree of insolence on the notice of their superiors, as if in a civil sense there must be a perfect equality among those who are one in Christ. Surely this betrays gross misconceptions of our religion, or much haughtiness of temper. "Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honour, that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed. And they that have believing masters, let them not despise them, because they are brethren" (as if they were all on a level); "but rather," remembering the appointments of Providence, "do them service\*."

Persons of higher rank should also learn to correct their proud and disdainful behaviour towards their inferiors. They have a right to use their labours; yet they should treat them with all gentleness of manners. These worldly distinctions will soon cease, and only that grand discrimination of characters which the grace of God produces will last for ever. If, therefore, we discover the image of the Saviour in them who are subject to our authority, they should be particularly dear to us for his sake, and we should rejoice over them from the delightful expectation that we shall meet them in heaven. There Onesimus and Philemon, with their beloved Paul, are worshipping in the same company. There may we also, and our respective families, make up

\* 1 Tim. vi. 1, 2.

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the household of faith, and join in the same acclamations of praise before the throne of God and of the Lamb!

The example before us may encourage the most atrocious sinners to return to God with the hope of finding mercy; but the subject is shamefully perverted if it embolden any to persist in their evil courses. Shall you dare to say, For the present I will give a loose to my heart's desires, but on some future day I will repent, and doubt not of obtaining forgiveness, even as Onesimus? Does the work of conversion lie within your own power? Or can you claim the grace which alone is able to effect it? Are the instances of such a change, in persons rejecting the Gospel, so numerous as to warrant your conclusion that you shall certainly be recovered? On the contrary, do you not see many suddenly taken away in their iniquities? and do not others, who are spared a longer time, become more and more obdurate, till, as we fear, they "fill up their sins," and perish with aggravated ruin for their contempt of salvation? Presume not, then, on distant opportunities, which may never be granted: resist not your present convictions, lest they should return no more. You have trifled too much already: O give the remainder of your short life to Him, for whose service you were made: thankfully accept his offered mercy, and endeavour to improve every succeeding day for his glory!

## HOLY ANGELS.

### CHAP. XIII.

*Angels, their nature, character, and situation—are God's ministers, and perform his purposes—study and admire the plan of redemption—announced the birth of Jesus—worshipped him—attended him—declared his resurrection—rejoice in the conversion of sinners—watch over believers—will accompany Jesus to the last judgment—summon the world—approve and execute the different sentences—will be for ever employed in praising God—confirmed in their holy and happy state—and united with redeemed saints.*

IN contemplating the various characters of men, we perceive much cause to mourn for the sad effects which sin has produced upon the earth. Some of these characters exhibit nothing but evil. Others discover a real excellency of disposition and conduct; but such are their defects, so interrupted their obedience, that even in them the purposes of Heaven seem, as yet, to be imperfectly answered. Our species evidently appears in a fallen state; an extreme depravity universally prevails, which is offensive to God, obscures his glory, and spreads confusion and misery through the whole system of human affairs.

Possibly there may be other worlds, where no such apostacy has taken place, and where Jehovah, the great Lord of all, is continually receiving the full tribute of honour, love, and service, from thousands of intelligent and holy creatures. We have certain information that there is one blessed society of this kind, the angels of God in heaven, who will

furnish

furnish us with matter of useful and delightful meditation, when we are distressed by a view of our own unhappy circumstances.

These exalted beings are, as much as ourselves, the workmanship of God, and as entirely dependent upon him. It should seem that they were brought into existence before the human species; but they were made, even as we, in subjection to the holy law of God, and are required always to do his will, and show forth his praise. "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory, and honour, and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created \*."

They are spirits possessed of large intellectual faculties; and though they have not flesh and bones †, nor any corporeal form like ours, they can become visible to us, when commissioned for special purposes. They are also endued with vigour of a superior sort; and accordingly they have produced effects to which no human exertions would be equal. They are called "mighty Angels," and are said to "excel in strength ‡." Their chief residence is in heaven, where the ever-blessed God manifests the splendour of his majesty; and where they are permitted "to behold the beauty of the Lord." Whilst, however, it is their privilege to appear in his immediate presence, they display his sovereignty and glory by bowing at his footstool. The society is extremely numerous. When Daniel saw "the Ancient of days" sitting on his throne, such was the Prophet's computation of his attendant armies: "Thousand thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him §." Our Lord declared that he could have procured for his assistance "more than twelve legions of angels ||," and it is further asserted that their company is "innumerable ¶." They are distinguished into different orders, and possess different degrees of glory and perfection: this seems to be im-

\* Rev. iv. 11. † Luke xxiv. 39. ‡ 2 Thess. i. 7. Psal. ciii. 20.  
§ Dan. vii. 9, 10. || Matt. xxvi. 53. ¶ Heb. xii. 22.

plied when they are represented as "thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers \*." Two of the celestial hierarchy are mentioned under the names of Michael and Gabriel; and, from the transactions in which they bore a part, we may consider them as obtaining a preference, and as filling the places of peculiar eminence and dignity †.

But, however they may be discriminated by various measures of excellence, they are all adorned with a splendour which human eyes, in our present state, could not bear. Some of the most advanced saints on earth have been confounded by their appearance. There is no defect in any of them. They are completely holy, and completely happy: being in all respects conformed to the will of God, they enjoy the constant assurances of his love. They can therefore tell, from their own experience, that "in his presence is fulness of joy; at his right hand there are pleasures for evermore ‡." In them let us admire the great Creator, from whom they have derived whatever they possess, and who alone is "the perfection of beauty." To him let us look in fervent prayer for the communications of his grace, if we wish to resemble these blessed spirits.

Let us inquire,

I. What is their employment in the present administration of the divine government? The Lord himself, by his continual and sovereign agency, upholds and regulates every part of the universe which he hath made. He wants no assistance; yet he is pleased to accomplish his purposes by various instruments which he uses, not through weakness, as earthly monarchs do, but for the display of his power and the glory of his majesty. The holy angels are called his "chariots;" and "the Lord is among them," riding, as it were, in great state and triumph §. They surround his throne with unceasing songs of praise and adoration, and stand ready to fly wherever he shall appoint.

\* Col. i. 16.

† Jude 9. Luke i. 19.

‡ Psal. xvi. 11.

§ Ixviii. 17. xviii. 19.

They

They are called his "ministers;" and, when commissioned by him for the execution of any plan, they proceed without hesitation upon the first intimation of his will, being lively, quick, and penetrating, as "a flaming fire \*." They "do his commandments," perfectly fulfilling all his pleasure, and esteeming it their honour to be employed in his service; yet they wait for his injunctions, "hearkening unto the voice of his word †." A revolt, indeed, has taken place among them, in consequence of which many of their company were driven out of heaven. But these of whom we now speak have uniformly and in every instance maintained their obedience.

They are interested in the concerns of this lower world. When the Lord "laid the foundations of the earth," they "sang together, and shouted for joy ‡;" and from the beginning, as the instruments of divine Providence, they have borne a part in the administration of human affairs. Throughout the Scripture history we remark the interposition of angels. By them the saints of God have been directed in their duty, warned of impending dangers, relieved under distresses, and rescued from enemies. We need not be particular in referring to examples. "The Angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them §." To such the promise is express, "He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone ||." But they have been commissioned also to execute judgment, as well as to perform acts of kindness. Thus "an angel stretched out his hand upon Jerusalem to destroy it ¶." Thus the camp of the enemy of God was once visited by the sword of an avenger: at midnight the cry of death was heard in the hosts of Sennacherib, and, when morning rose, the slaughter of thousands testified to the haughty monarch the stroke of an invi-

\* Psal. civ. 4.

† ciii. 20, 21.

‡ Job xxxviii. 4, 7.

§ Psal. xxxiv. 7.

|| xci. 11, 12.

¶ 2 Sam. xxiv. 16.

sible

sible arm\*. To a similar agency we are taught also to ascribe the sudden destruction of that tyrant Herod, who was smitten with a mortal disease in the moment of his profane exultation †.

Such are the facts which ancient history records: and what reason can be assigned why we should not believe these celestial messengers to be employed among ourselves as they were in former times? Though we do not discern their intervention, and cannot ascertain its extent or effects, yet it ought not to be denied. And, if it be allowed, does it not give us most exalted ideas of the divine Majesty? Is it so, that, in every part of God's dominion where we can be placed, we are surrounded by angels; and that this innumerable company is continually occupied in carrying on the purposes of his administration? Then how unspeakably great and glorious must he be! Will it not also fix a serious and useful impression upon our minds to be assured that these holy beings are about our path, watch over us, interest themselves in our happiness, and narrowly inspect our conduct? If only the veil of flesh and blood were removed, we should perceive ourselves in the midst of many witnesses. We know not how much we are indebted to their kind and active exertions in our favour. But what do they observe in our deportment? Are we not guilty of those actions before them, from which we should be deterred by the presence of any human creature? Are we not then afraid, lest, while they attest our folly and perverseness, they should be commanded to relinquish their charge?

We proceed to consider,

II. What attention they pay to the concerns of our salvation. Having preserved their original purity, they stand in no need of a Redeemer; yet, with a generous disinterested affection, they rejoice in the grace which is extended to us. It should seem that the great plan exhibited in the Gospel is the subject

\* 2 Kings xix. 35.

† Acts xii. 23.

of

of their holy meditations, and excites their praise and wonder. They do not treat it with contempt, as many of those evidently do whose everlasting state depends upon it. Probably they understand much of its glory, while they stoop down with eager solicitude to discover more. Though the lustre which attracts their notice prevents by its radiance their closer inspection, and compels them to confess that it "passeth knowledge," yet they still long for a fuller revelation of the divine counsel: "they desire to look into the things" which are thus hidden from the view by their own incomprehensible excellence\*.

They could not but feel astonishment when first informed that the exalted Personage, who is their Lord and God, was about to assume our nature, and become a suffering inhabitant of the earth, that he might rescue us from destruction. Even to the present hour they are unable to fathom this deep mystery. But they admire the divine perfections of wisdom, power, love, truth, and holiness, as displayed in the cross of Christ: and perhaps in no other instance have they seen so much the character of Jehovah. Accordingly it is declared to be one part of the grand design, "that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God †."

"When the fulness of the time was come" that the Saviour should appear, they were employed in various ways. They announced his incarnation to Zacharias, Mary, and Joseph ‡, proclaimed "the good tidings" of his nativity to the shepherds, and then, in a numerous company, praised God "for his unspeakable gift §." They cried aloud, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." Then indeed was "Jesus seen of angels ||:" they contemplated the incarnate God with fixed attention and holy admiration, and were required to acknowledge his divine character by ren-

\* 1 Pet. i. 12.

† Eph. iii. 10.

‡ Matt. i. and Luke i.

§ Luke ii. 8—14.

|| 1 Tim. iii. 16.

dering

dering him unfeigned homage. When the Father bringeth the First-Begotten into the world, he saith "Let all the angels of God worship him \*."

During the whole of the Redeemer's abode on earth, even through his deepest humiliation, they waited upon him as their Lord. After his severe conflict in the wilderness, "Behold, angels came, and ministered unto him †." When he was ready to faint by means of the agony and bloody sweat which he endured in the garden of Gethsemane, "there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him ‡." It was one of this illustrious society who rolled away the stone, that his disciples might be permitted to examine his sepulchre; and it should seem that several of these holy beings were employed in attesting his resurrection §. Upon his ascension into heaven, two of them in shining forms presented themselves to his apostles, and predicted their Lord's triumphant return at the last day ||: and when he, in human nature, entered into glory amidst the acclamations of all his numerous host, his pre-eminence over them was declared; "Angels, and authorities, and powers, being made subject unto him ¶."

As the servants of Jesus, they not only join in his praises with the church above, but promote the purposes of his mercy in the church below, by ways which we pretend not to explain. They are not sent forth to preach the Gospel; this honour being reserved for sinners, who feel their own need of that salvation which they propose, and are more likely to sympathize with their hearers in all the various circumstances of distress and temptation. But these blessed spirits attend our religious assemblies as witnesses of our devotions, and with a peculiar eagerness of desire for the success of the ministry \*\*. "There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth ††;" as if every new convert

\* Heb. i. 6. † Matt. iv. 11. ‡ Luke xxii. 43. § Matt. xxviii. 2-7. Mark xvi. 5-8. Luke xxiv. 4-7. John xx. 12. || Acts i. 10, 11. ¶ 1 Pet. iii. 22. \*\* 1 Cor. xi. 10. Eccles. v. 6. †† Luke xv. 10.

was

was an addition to their happiness. Whilst they praise God for such an instance of his goodness, they exult in the victory obtained over the powers of darkness, and in the enlargement of the Redeemer's kingdom. They receive the young believer under their care, being commissioned to watch over him for his protection and comfort. Thus we are assured, with respect to the weakest and most inconsiderable members of the church, "Their angels," or those who are deputed to be their guardians, are no less than the exalted spirits who stand near the throne, and "always behold the face of God in heaven \*." None of them are too great to be exempted from these services; "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation †?"

Soon they will deliver up their charge, and conduct the souls of those who were committed to them "through the valley of the shadow of death" to their glorious and best abode. Thus, when Lazarus died, he "was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom ‡." Believers, then, on their dismissal from the body, are attended by these holy beings, and enter into a state of immediate and delightful intercourse with them; so that they will join together, in one company, to ascribe "Blessing, and honour, and glory, unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever §."

We profess to admire the excellency of this celestial host; but should we not also cultivate a similar disposition? While they, who are so eminent in wisdom, are giving all serious regard to the work of redemption, shall we think it a mark of good sense and superior understanding to turn from the consideration of it with disdain? Is it beneath us to imitate their example, and "desire to look into" the same important subject? We would therefore ask our readers, Do you, like the angels, contemplate the incarnate God and Saviour with astonishment

\* Matt. xviii. 10. † Heb. i. 14. ‡ Luke xvi. 22. § Rev. v. 13.

and fervour of affection, and bow before him with deepest reverence and adoration? Do you adopt their rapturous anthems, and praise God for the birth of his Son? How can you be unconcerned about this amazing transaction, with which the honour of God and the salvation both of yourselves and others are immediately connected? Do you feel a generous solicitude for the souls of your fellow-creatures, and rejoice "over one sinner that repenteth?" Rather, have you not, on such an occasion, shown a malignant displeasure, and thrown out virulent reproaches? Have you not exerted your influence to obstruct the progress of the Gospel? While you possess such tempers, these immaculate spirits cannot look upon you with favourable regard, however you may be esteemed and applauded by your gay and dissolute companions. O, be persuaded to pay a deference to the opinion and example of those whose wisdom and goodness stand unimpeached, and unite with them in the most vigorous efforts to do the will of God, and promote his glory!

In our attention to the character of angels, it will be proper to examine,

III. What concern they bear in the solemn proceedings of the last day. The grand scheme of redemption being completed, the Saviour will appear as the supreme and universal Judge, and by his irrevocable sentence declare the everlasting state of the whole human race. How important the decision!

The Scriptures do not represent these holy beings as called to account for their conduct before the tribunal of Christ; but it should seem that they will be employed, for various purposes, at his advent. When he shall descend from heaven, they will attend him as his faithful servants, and grace his triumph. "The Son of man shall come in his glory, with ten thousand of his saints, and all the holy angels with him \*." so that heaven shall pour forth its inhabitants, to display the majesty of the King, and exe-

\* Matt. xxv. 31. Jude 14.

cute

cute his orders. They shall give the summons for all mankind to stand at his bar. "The voice of the archangel," announcing his approach, shall be particularly distinguished on that awful occasion \*. And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other †. The tremendous sound will penetrate the deepest recesses of the grave; and each individual of Adam's posterity must obey the call.

All nations being now assembled before the Judge, and the different characters separated, arraigned, and tried, "every man's work shall be made manifest," and every secret thing be brought forth for public inspection ‡. Then shall these illustrious spirits who surround the throne not only stand as witnesses, but even be appealed to for the equity of the solemn proceedings. This, at least, seems to be implied in our Lord's declarations: "Whosoever shall confess me before men, him shall the Son of man also confess before the angels of God: but he that denieth me before men, shall be denied before the angels of God §." They likewise will be commissioned to carry the decisive sentence into immediate execution. They are "the reapers," to whom the Lord of the harvest will say, "Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn ||." When, therefore, the Judge shall pronounce "Come, ye blessed," and "Depart from me, ye cursed ¶," they, acknowledging and approving the just award, will conduct the righteous with great triumph to their mansions of bliss and glory, and thrust down the impenitent, with shame and everlasting contempt, into the fire prepared for the devil and his apostate company.

Who among us can read or hear of these things with indifference? Let us not forget how much we are interested in the transactions of that day. We

\* 1 Thess. iv. 16. † Matt. xxiv. 31. ‡ 1 Cor. iii. 13. iv. 5.  
§ Luke xii. 8, 9. || Matt. xiii. 20, 29. ¶ xxv. 34, 41.

must



must all obey the summons of the archangel's trumpet, and stand before the great tribunal. But how shall we bear the strict examination when our actions and principles shall be sifted and exhibited to public view before the inhabitants of heaven as well as those of earth? Are there none who will wish to hide their heads, or fly from the presence of the Judge? But an escape or concealment will be impossible. The most stout-hearted sinner must await his doom: nor can he resist or retard the affliction of his punishment. When the tremendous sentence shall be pronounced, "Cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness \*," the word will be powerful, and the execution instantaneous. No accusation, however, shall prevail against those who are justified by the faith of Jesus. They shall go into life eternal, attended by all the hosts of heaven, before whom they shall receive the high distinctions of the crown of righteousness and the palm of victory: they shall be clothed with white raiment, and even seated with the Saviour in his throne. Such honour will the saints of God obtain, in the presence, and by the ministration, of angels.

In relation to these bright spirits, it remains only that we observe,

IV. What will be their situation in the kingdom of glory for ever. We have already remarked that they are admitted to view the full and unveiled splendour of the Deity, and, while they wait in readiness to perform his pleasure, are continually offering up the song and sacrifice of praise. We presume not to explain the nature of their worship: but some general account is given us by the Prophet. Isaiah tells us that he "saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up;" that "above it stood the seraphims, and one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory †." Such, we conclude, will be their state and employment through eternity; for, as they are

\* Matt. xxv. 30.

† Isa. vi. 1-8.

called

called "the elect angels \*," they will never be dispossessed of their present happiness and exaltation.

We know not that any particular change will be made in their condition at the last judgment; but it is probable that they will experience an increase of felicity. Being confirmed in their purity and obedience, and united as one family with all redeemed saints, they will join with one heart and voice in praising and adoring God and the Lamb. The Lord Jesus Christ is the centre of this union: in Him they meet, and are incorporated into the same society. Accordingly St. Paul declares it was the grand purpose of God, "That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth, even in Him †." The object of their worship is the same, and a perfect agreement in sentiment and affection will subsist between them. Yet a distinction must be made. The angels, who never sinned, cannot be considered as the purchase of the Saviour, and are not indebted to his sacrifice and intercession for the honourable situation in which they are placed. They are struck with the view of his grace and glory, and constrained to sing, with a rapturous admiration, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain." But those of our fallen race, whom he hath ransomed from sin and hell, will feel their superior obligations, and endeavour to express their gratitude and affection in strains peculiar to themselves; for they will add, "He hath redeemed us to God by his blood ‡." This, indeed, is a song "which no man can learn" but those "who follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth §."

The faithful disciples of Christ may look forwards with unspeakable delight to that time when they shall join the blessed society above. Perhaps you are now surrounded by those who despise and blaspheme the God of heaven; but soon shall you be united to them who love and serve him without weariness

\* 1 Tim. v. 21. † Eph. i. 10. ‡ Rev. v. 8-19. § xiv. 3, 4.

ness

ness or imperfection. You carry about with you, for the present, an infirm, vile, corruptible body, and, what is more painful, a depraved mind; but after a few days you shall be rescued from this state of degradation and bondage, when you shall resemble the angels themselves in purity, happiness, and glory\*. Even here, indeed, you worship and obey the same Lord, and the thought may afford you some consolation, when you are ready to conclude that you are left alone, and that there are none to take your part. Thousands of these spotless beings stand round about you, approve your conduct, and are commissioned to minister to your relief. Could you draw aside the veil which conceals the invisible world, what a scene would be displayed! Enough to render you superior to all the insults and cruelties of an opposing world. Like Elisha, when compassed with threatening enemies, you would see these chariots of fire sent down from heaven in your defence; and, possessing your souls in peace, you would exclaim, with the Prophet, "Fear not; for they that be with us are more than they that be with them †."

But, while you rejoice in their friendship and protection, you should propose their bright examples of goodness for your own imitation. At least, you should not be satisfied with any thing short of their obedience. Your Lord himself has taught you to pray that the will of God may be done on earth, "as it is in heaven." You are not to regulate your practice by the defective standard of human righteousness, but must press forwards to attainments, which may, in some measure, resemble the holiness of angels. They serve God perfectly, without exception of one duty; constantly, without intermission; and cheerfully, without compulsion; nay, with fervent love and supreme delight. This, also, you should aspire after; and therefore earnestly covet and implore increasing communications of that

\* Matt. xxii. 30.

† 2 Kings vi. 15—17.

grace,

grace, by which you will finally be brought into a state of complete conformity with them. But, on comparing yourselves with the pattern here exhibited, are you not deeply ashamed and humbled?

Those pure and exalted creatures in every respect answer the end of their being. Many, alas! of our corrupt race, are not merely defective in righteousness, but totally opposite to this character. Do we not live among those who are actuated by tempers and principles as contrary to those of angels as darkness to light? We, therefore, solemnly appeal to them, and ask, Of what sort will be your society hereafter? Disposed as you now are, you cannot have fellowship with the host of heaven, nor they with you. Their employment is what you will never relish: you detest and put away from you what is their highest delight. It is not possible that they should accommodate themselves to your depraved taste; for this would involve an opposition to God and an exclusion from happiness. Your prospect is indeed tremendous. You must dwell with those whom you resemble, and with whom you are confederate in rebellion against Jehovah. Is this what you can bear to think of? Yet most assuredly you must have your portion with evil spirits, unless you be created anew in Christ Jesus.

May the Lord God, in sovereign mercy, pour out his sanctifying influence upon all orders and ranks of men! May he form us to be a people for his name, and make us of one heart and mind with the church above! So shall we understand and feel the meaning of those exalted anthems which we are taught to use. With sincere and ardent devotion we shall cry aloud to the God of our salvation, "With angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify thy glorious name; evermore praising thee, and saying, Holy, holy, holy Lord God of hosts; heaven and earth are full of thy glory: Glory be to thee, O Lord most high \*!" Amen.

\* Communion Service.

EVIL

## EVIL SPIRITS.

## CHAP. XIV.

*Evil spirits, their existence, fall, and exclusion from heaven—tempted our first parents—maintain large influence in the earth, among the impenitent—once were permitted to possess men's bodies—opposed the Saviour—still resist the progress of the Gospel—assault believers—yet their agency does not extenuate our guilt—will soon be confounded—summoned to judgment—and doomed to eternal punishment.*

AFTER the strong proofs which we have seen of man's apostacy from God, perhaps the question may arise, Is this the only order of intelligent beings who have revolted from their obedience? Or, where did sin originate? The sacred records have informed us of another system of creatures who were the first transgressors, and are the authors and abettors of that rebellion which has prevailed in our own world. We proceed, therefore, to observe, that there are devils in hell, as well as angels in heaven. There is a numerous company of wicked spirits who discover a blasphemous contempt of God, and are continually endeavouring to defeat the purposes of his government. The contemplation of their wretched condition may excite many painful sensations; but the subject seems properly to come under our plan, as being closely connected with Scripture history; and it may be productive of solid advantage, if we consider it with true seriousness of mind.

Their influence in human affairs, and even their existence, have been denied. But, if we allow the inspiration of the Bible, we ought implicitly to receive

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its testimony in every particular. We attempt to invalidate its authority, if we think ourselves at liberty to reject those declarations, however clear and express, which cannot be accommodated to our systems or wishes. Now, no account can be delivered in plainer terms, none more repeatedly asserted and confirmed, than that which is given of the fallen angels. It is no good objection to this history that it does not contain so full and minute a relation as our curiosity might desire; for it never was designed that we should understand every thing, or obtain perfect satisfaction in our speculative inquiries. But, if we admit what the Scripture hath revealed concerning the state, character, and employment of evil spirits, we shall have a consistent explanation of what we observe both in ourselves and others. A serious attention to the world around us, and to the wild and irregular workings, of which we cannot but be conscious, in our own minds, would incline us to believe, even if we had no Bible, that we are subject to a foreign influence of a malignant kind. Universal experience verifies what the inspired volume has affirmed. May we be led to admire and adore that grace, which not only restrains the malice of these unholy beings, but is effectual to rescue us from their power! May our great Deliverer break the bonds by which many of our sinful race are still enslaved, and give them to know that his service is the most perfect freedom!

In the history of wicked spirits we must consider,  
I. Their fall. A total and lamentable change has taken place both in their situation and disposition. Originally they were possessed of dignity, purity, and happiness, which they have now entirely lost. They were ranked amongst the angels in heaven, and equal to them in excellency and glory; but they "kept not their first estate;" renouncing their obedience to God, they "left their own habitation," being driven out with shame and confusion\*. They are called "principalities and powers," and are said to have been "in

\* Jude 6.

high

high places \* ;” which shows that they were endued with eminent faculties, and distinguished among the superior orders of the celestial hierarchy. But their exaltation was no preservative ; they have suffered a tremendous degradation. A numerous company, combined under one leader, who is named Satan or Beelzebub, joined in rebellion against Jehovah. We do not inquire into the particular nature and circumstances of their transgression. But it should seem that they were instigated by ambition, or a vain desire of knowledge or pre-eminence beyond the divine appointment ; for, when St. Paul speaks of one “ lifted up with pride,” he describes him as “ falling into the condemnation of the devil †.” It is sufficient, however, to say that they sinned.

Having then cast off their allegiance to God, they could no longer associate with those whose whole delight is to do his will, and worship at his feet. Having lost their holiness, they could not retain their felicity ; for misery is the necessary consequence of depravity and guilt. Every good principle was banished, every vile affection admitted : they became a torment to themselves. But their wretchedness is not to be considered merely as the unavoidable effect of their apostacy ; it is the righteous infliction of their incensed Sovereign. His authority being despised, his anger was provoked, and his justice armed with terrors against them. He could not suffer them to remain in heaven with a spirit of disobedience or independence. He appointed them a new place, and consigned them to a state of extreme and endless punishment in hell, where they are exhibited as an example of the malignant nature and destructive tendency of sin. How astonishing a change was this ! Let us learn from it to revere the holiness of God, who “ cannot look on iniquity,” and the strictness of his government, which guards his law by so tremendous a penalty as “ the vengeance of eternal fire.” “ Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy

\* Eph. vi. 12.

† 1 Tim. iii. 6.

name?”

name?” Thou art indeed “ a consuming fire” to all who presume to resist thy power. While we hear of thine awful dispensations towards the rebellious angels, “ our flesh trembleth for fear of thee, and we are afraid of thy judgments \*.”

In considering the case of these apostate creatures, we must proceed to remark,

II. Their present situation and employment. It was not possible that by any exertions they should recover their former abode and purity, and we apprehend that they have never really wished it. They could not deliver themselves from torment, or return to their former allegiance. They retain an invariable rooted enmity against God ; and it should seem that ever since their fall they have been attempting to overturn or obstruct his government. Such evidently appeared to be their disposition at the creation of our world. Perhaps the happiness of our first parents excited their envy. Certain it is that upon them they fixed their malicious eyes, and consulted how to cast them down from their eminence, and draw them into the same state of disobedience and misery with themselves. They contrive a temptation, which, through the subtle management of their grand leader, succeeded. He took the opportunity of spreading the snare before Eve, when she was alone. He solicited her compliance by proposing a pleasant gratification of appetite, and a more exalted condition. She listened to his lies, which were couched in fair speeches : she consented, and then prevailed upon her husband also to transgress.

Thus the standard of rebellion was erected upon the earth ; its inhabitants were seduced, and joined in confederacy with the infernal host. Those wicked spirits probably triumphed in that calamitous event, as if they had prevailed against Jehovah, and represented him as a weak and cruel tyrant, who could not secure his own dominion, or preserve the affection of his subjects. The very end of our creation

\* Psal. cxix. 120.

seemed

seemed to be defeated; and had not God, in sovereign mercy, interposed to repair the breach, the whole human race must have remained for ever alienated from him, and exposed to his fierce indignation.

We perceive by what tempers these unholy beings are influenced. A proud opposition to God, and hatred of all goodness, assiduity and zeal in promoting evil, falsehood, and treachery, an envious disgust at the happiness or excellence of others, and a desire to spread sin and misery to the greatest possible extent,—these are some of the leading principles which mark the character of Satan and his associates. “He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it\*.” “The devil sinneth from the beginning †:” he was the original transgressor, and has ever since been practising iniquity with unceasing activity and vigour. This is “our adversary,” whom we are required to “resist, steadfast in the faith,” “because, as a roaring lion, he walketh about, seeking whom he may devour ‡.” All his apostate company are of like description. They are called “spiritual wickedness §,” or wicked spirits: they are themselves most corrupt and abominable, and unwearied in their endeavours to render others equally depraved.

Their stratagems, alas! have been fatally successful among the human race. For which reason it should seem Satan is styled “the prince” and “the god of this world ||.” He cannot possess any rightful authority; yet he meets with general submission, though he is a base usurper. We speak of him as the representative of all the fallen spirits, and ascribe to him whatever they effect or attempt, since he directs their movements. Let us examine what influence he has exercised and what mischief he has produced among the posterity of Adam. The account may

\* John viii. 44.

§ Eph. vi. 12.

† 1 John iii. 8.

|| John xvi. 11.

‡ 1 Pet. v. 8, 9.

2 Cor. iv. 4.

be offensive to our pride; but, without wishing to conceal or palliate the truth, we must give a faithful representation of the case.

In the Old Testament Satan was “the lying spirit” by whom the false prophets were instigated\*; and, in the New, those preachers who pervert right doctrine are said to be his ministers †. Nay, it is expressly declared that all those, who, like him, are actuated by pride, envy, malice, or deceit, are his children, and “will do the lusts of their father ‡.” He it was who tempted Judas to sell and betray the Saviour, and, having taken full possession of the perfidious wretch, deserted him not till he had accomplished his utter destruction of body and soul §. The same infernal agent filled the heart of Ananias to “lie to the Holy Ghost ||:” and, wherever any persons reject salvation, the effect is in some measure to be ascribed to Satan’s malignant interference. He “hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them ¶.” He is “the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience\*\*.” Sinners may not be aware whom they serve, and under whose instigation they act. But from the Scriptures we learn that Satan maintains dominion over them, and that, however they may seem to differ from each other, they all follow his guidance, and bear his image. He stirs up antichrist to oppose or pervert the purity of the Gospel ††; and “takes captive at his will” those who resist the truth ‡‡. We readily allow, perhaps, that such atrocious offenders as “Cain, who slew his brother,” may be “of that wicked one;” but it is equally certain that “he that committeth sin,” though it be in a less scandalous way, “is of the devil §§.” Such declarations should

\* 1 Kings xxii. 21—23.

† John xiii. 2, 27.

‡ Eph. ii. 2.

§§ 1 John iii. 8, 12.

† 2 Cor. xi. 15.

|| Acts v. 3.

†† 2 Thess. ii. 9.

‡ John viii. 44.

¶ 2 Cor. iv. 4.

\*\* 2 Tim ii. 26.

excite us to inquire, with real earnestness, "To whom do we yield ourselves servants to obey?"

Various are the devices by which our spiritual adversary prevails. He tempts men to the practice of evil, by exhibiting to their view a flattering prospect of its pleasure, and concealing the danger. He suggests to them, as he did to our first parents, "Ye shall not surely die\*;" and it seems to be the masterpiece of his subtlety to induce them to believe that there is no future punishment. Thus he endeavours to lull them asleep and stupify their consciences, not from a benevolent desire of rendering them happy, but that he may more effectually secure their obedience to himself, and accomplish their final destruction. He is "the strong man," who gains possession of the sinner's heart, and there being "armed keepeth his palace; and his goods are in peace †."

Yet his malignity has appeared in other forms. At the time of our Lord's incarnation, he was permitted, for special reasons, to exercise a peculiar power over the bodies of many persons, who were, in consequence, miserably afflicted and tormented. In their distressful cases we perceive that he studies to torture and destroy by every possible method. It has been thought that those, who, by apostolical censures, were "delivered unto Satan," suffered in the same way; and that the evil spirit, as the executioner of divine justice, inflicted upon them certain diseases, or excruciating pains ‡. But, be that as it may, such is his malice, that, if he were left without restraint to gratify his own mischievous disposition, we should no longer experience a moment's ease, or enjoy our faculties either of body or mind: the earth would be a resemblance of hell. O, how great are our obligations to our Almighty Preserver!

It becomes us, in an especial manner, to adore the God of all grace, who proposes in the Gospel complete and final deliverance from our infernal adversary.

\* Gen. iii. 4. † Luke xi. 21. ‡ 1 Cor. v. 5. 1 Tim. i. 20.

The Lord Jesus Christ has lifted up a standard against him, and undertakes for all believers to defeat his purposes. He has interposed to ransom them by the might of his Spirit, and at the expense of his own precious blood. The merciful design was revealed to our first parents immediately after their revolt, when it was declared that the Seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head\*. Satan is unwilling to renounce the dominion which he has usurped, and with violence opposes the intentions of the Redeemer. There are, therefore, two contending parties: a sharp conflict has been maintained from the beginning; and it is not possible that any reconciliation between them should be effected. This circumstance exhibits another feature in the character of the fiend: he resists the Saviour, and labours with the utmost vigour to prevent or obstruct the influence of his grace. O, let us be afraid of bearing any the most distant resemblance to such a horrid disposition!

During our Lord's abode on earth he endured extreme distress from the violent assaults of this antagonist. Forty days he was harassed by his temptations in the wilderness: and then the devil, when vanquished and obliged to retire, departed only "for a season †." Probably the attack was renewed, though without success. Jesus observed to his enemies, near the close of his life, "This is your hour, and the power of darkness ‡;" whence it should seem that Satan was then permitted to make his fiercest onset, and to try what his malice could do. But, with a reference to that onset, the Saviour exclaimed, in a delightful exultation, "The prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me §." The foe, indeed, so far prevailed, as to procure the crucifixion, and to enjoy a temporary triumph in the completion of his wishes; but that event proved the ruin of his own kingdom. We are encouraged to rejoice that

\* Gen. iii. 15.

† Luke iv. 13.

‡ John xiv. 30.

§ xxii. 53.

our victorious Redeemer "through death destroyed him that had the power of death, that is, the devil\*."

Consistently with his character as "the enemy of all righteousness," Satan has uniformly endeavoured to obstruct the Gospel. This being the most effectual instrument for "the pulling down of his strong holds," and the emancipation of his captives, he may be expected to oppose it with all his strength and subtlety. Wherever, therefore, the word of grace and salvation is preached, he watches for an opportunity to prevent its success. Like a bird of the air, he hovers about the place in which the good seed is sown, and takes it out of men's hearts, "lest they should believe and be saved †." He is the enemy which soweth tares in the field, with a view to defeat the designs of its proprietor ‡. If we are favoured with an evangelical ministry, the consideration of such a malicious intruder should awaken a holy circumspection and fear. As it is his plan to keep us in ignorance and unbelief, he will endeavour to cast reproach upon the truth, and fill our minds with prejudice. Let us suspect and guard against his influence. The most violent persecutors of the church are his instruments; he assists them in the contrivance and execution of their schemes. Even the imprisonment of the saints is ascribed to him, because it is effected under his instigation §. He is active, likewise, in promoting false doctrines and divisions among Christians, as the probable means of obstructing the work of God. How solicitous should we be, lest, through our folly or perverseness, "we get an advantage of us!" We ought to be constantly aware "of his devices ||."

Those who are rescued from his dominion, and devoted to the service of Christ, must look for a severe attack, since the tyrant will not quietly resign his prey. Young converts generally experience a

\* Heb. ii. 14.

† Luke viii. 12.

‡ Matt. xiii. 37—39.

§ Rev. ii. 10.

|| 2 Cor. ii. 11.

peculiar

peculiar degree of his malice. He seems to practise upon them every method of temptation by which he may shake their religious principles, and subject them again to his own authority. When these fail, and they, who were once his willing captives, are evidently brought into the glorious liberty of the children of God, then indeed the power of the usurper is broken, but his enmity remains the same. He will continually endeavour to disturb the peace of believers, and distress those whom he cannot destroy. This malignant influence alone will account for the strange commotions which are excited in their minds. Difficulties, doubts, and fears, are suggested, by which their faith is staggered; and with a kind of violent importunity they are solicited to act in opposition to their better judgment and desires. Such is the warfare which they must be prepared to maintain through life. Satan is a restless opponent; when one scheme fails, he will try the effect of another. He is constantly aiming to harass and seduce the servants of the Lord by some new device, and with every fresh circumstance he varies his mode of attack.

He it was who tempted David to transgress, probably through motives of ambition, by numbering the people\*. By his malevolent interference, Job, that eminent saint of God, was reduced to a state of extreme distress, confusion, and horror. When "Joshua the high-priest," as the representative of the church, "stood before the Angel of the Lord," pleading for acceptance, "Satan stood at his right hand to resist him †." This is a striking picture of our adversary's employment: for he is "the accuser of our brethren, who accuseth them before our God day and night ‡." The Apostles of Christ were once induced to forsake their Lord; but he himself accounted for that strange event when he said, "Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat §." St. Paul was perplexed and almost over-

\* 1 Chron. xxi. 1. † Zech. iii. 1. ‡ Rev. xii. 10. § Luke xxii. 3.

whelmed by a severe affliction, which he calls "a thorn in the flesh;" but the sharpness of the trial was owing to the influence of this wicked spirit: it was "the messenger of Satan to buffet him\*." After such instances, who shall expect to escape an attack? Every believer is called to be a soldier, and expressly required to be prepared for the combat, by "putting on the whole armour of God," in order "to stand against the wiles of the devil †." It is spoken of as probable that the foe may shoot his "fiery darts" into the soul, whilst an assurance is given that "the shield of faith" will quench them ‡. There is therefore only one method of safety: "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you §."

It should be remembered, that, notwithstanding the power of the tempter, our moral liberty is not so impaired as to render us in any degree the less accountable for our actions. He may propose the commission of sin, and solicit our compliance; but he cannot succeed, except by our own voluntary consent. Yet, alas! how prone are we to yield to his suggestions! Such is the depravity of our nature, that it is always ready to second his attempts; and therefore his ascendancy over us will not furnish us with an excuse; nay, rather, it shows the greatness of our guilt. We are his willing vassals; and his service, though most oppressive, is what we choose. We must blame him, but we cannot acquit ourselves. Let us lie down ashamed, and earnestly deprecate that wrath which we have deserved.

In attending to the scriptural declarations concerning apostate spirits, we have only to remark further,

III. Their future doom. They are already consigned to a state of extreme punishment, as the due reward of their transgression, without hope of deliverance. Their character and situation are fixed and determined for ever. A Saviour is provided for us, but not for them: and yet there was nothing in our

\* 2 Cor. xii. 7.

† Eph. vi. 11.

‡ 16

§ James iv. 7.

case,

case, any more than in theirs, which could encourage an expectation of forgiveness. Criminals can have no claim to favour. Here, then, we behold the astonishing grace and distinguishing love of our Redeemer. They are dealt with in the way of strict justice, and cannot complain of suffering wrongfully. But rich mercy is displayed towards our species. The Lord Jesus "took not on him the nature of angels;" he did not interpose for the rescue of those miserable beings, who were once angels in heaven; "but he took on him the seed of Abraham," pledging himself for the salvation of all those of the human race who should partake of that Patriarch's faith\*.

The present system exhibits a conflict between the evil spirits and our exalted Redeemer: but it is drawing to a close, and the final issue will be for his glory and their everlasting confusion. In the prospect of this complete victory, Jesus at one time exclaimed, "I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven †;" and at another, "Now shall the prince of this world be cast out ‡." St. Paul also thus encourages believers to triumph on the same account, "The God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly §." The malignant fiend will be permitted to maintain his influence among men a little longer. But soon he shall be bound for a thousand years ||, and during that period confined to his own place, without exercising the destructive power upon earth which he now possesses. His dominion shall be subdued, and "the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ ¶." Afterwards he shall be suffered to regain his ascendancy for a short season, in which, as it should seem, iniquity will prevail more generally than it has ever done \*\*. But "the end of all things" will immediately succeed, and exhibit a tremendous scene.

Satan and his vile associates will be summoned to the tribunal of Christ, and examined in the last judg-

\* Heb. ii. 16. † Luke x. 18. ‡ Jolin xii. 31. § Rom. xvi. 20.

|| Rev. xx. 2.

¶ xi. 15.

\*\* xx. 7, &c.

U 2

ment.



ment. However haughty and unwilling, they must bend their necks before the injured majesty of God, and the malignity of their characters and the justice of their punishment will be publicly evinced. They are now "reserved in everlasting chains under darkness," and there can be no possibility of escape: but they will be brought forth "to the judgment of the great day \*," that their conduct may be submitted to the inspection of the assembled universe. The horrid stratagems by which they deceive the world and harass the church of God will then be unfolded, and greatly aggravate their condemnation. Believers, who are now the object of their malice, will triumph in their destruction, being admitted to preside as the assessors of Christ in that solemn trial. They will approve, rejoice in, and in some sense pass, the sentence. "Know ye not," said St. Paul, "that we shall judge angels †?"

The book of judgment being closed, these apostate spirits will be "cast into the lake of fire and brimstone ‡," where their misery will surpass our utmost conceptions, and whence there can be no release. Impenitent sinners also shall have their portion with them. Though the fire was "prepared for the devil and his angels §," because they were the original transgressors, yet there shall they all, the deceived and the deceiver, in one horrible company, "be tormented day and night for ever and ever. This torment will in no respect tend to change or soften their obdurate minds. They will retain their hatred of God, "blaspheme his name, and not repent, to give him glory ||." The justice of God, therefore, will not remove or mitigate the punishment throughout eternity. It is declared, in the most express terms of which language is capable, that it shall be "everlasting." And who shall presume to object or prescribe to God the proper measures of his government, as if we were more competent to decide what his own righteous perfections may demand?

\* Jude 6.

† 1 Cor. vi. 3.

‡ Rev. xx. 10.

§ Matt. xxv. 41.

|| Rev. xvi. 9.

The

The awful subject naturally gives rise to various reflections.

1. Let "the redeemed of the Lord" rejoice and triumph in their great Deliverer. While you contemplate the character and state of the infernal host, you cannot but be deeply impressed with your immense obligations. Are you not constrained to cry out, with devout admiration of your distinguished mercies, "Behold what God hath wrought!" How much has Jesus done; how much has he pledged himself to accomplish in your behalf! Already you are "delivered from the power of darkness \*," and "have overcome the wicked one †." But for the present you may expect to feel very painful attacks from your malicious foe, though you shall not fall by his hands. His purposes against you shall finally be baffled, and even rendered subservient to your spiritual and eternal welfare. Only remember whence all your strength is to be derived: you will "overcome him by the blood of the Lamb ‡." To your faith you must likewise add a diligent attention to duty. You are required to wrestle and fight, to watch and pray: and this should be your daily, your unceasing, employment. You have ratified the solemn vow, that you will "renounce the devil and all his works §:" never then dare to think of returning to his infamous service. Lift up your supplication to the God of all grace, that He may "deliver you from evil ||," from the wicked one, "from his crafts and assaults," and "finally beat down Satan under your feet ¶."

2. Let penitents, who feel their own weakness, and dread the power of these spiritual enemies, be encouraged. We allow that there would be just cause for fear and despondency if there were none to administer support. But the Lord hath said "I have laid help upon One that is mighty \*\*." We refer you to Jesus, who can dispossess "the strong man, and take from him all his armour, wherein he

\* Col. i. 13. † 1 John ii. 13.

‡ Rev. xii. 11.

§ Catechism

|| Lord's Prayer. ¶ Litany.

\*\* Psal. lxxxix. 19.

trusted.

trusted\*." O, fly to this Saviour, and entreat his gracious assistance and protection! "Surely He shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler: He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler†." The horrid temptations by which you are assaulted, and which excite distressing apprehensions in your minds, are a favourable sign. We conclude, from the violence of your adversary, that you are rescued from his dominion; for, if you were still held in subjection, he would not alarm, but quiet your fears, and lull your consciences asleep. Persist, then, in a determined opposition to the prince of darkness, and indulge the pleasing hope that Jesus has broken the yoke of your oppressor, and will shortly give you complete deliverance.

3. Let careless sinners be persuaded to consider whose servants they are, and how their schemes of iniquity must terminate. It appears from the Scripture account, however unwilling you may be to acknowledge it, that, while you are alienated from God, you are in subjection to Satan. You yield a ready compliance to the proposals of that evil spirit; you act as his confederates, under his influence, and are conformed to his likeness. And does he not excite in your hearts such tempers and affections as render you wretched in yourselves, and mischievous to society? Where then can you expect your final portion? "If God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell ‡," is it to be imagined that he will spare you, who despise and reject that mercy which was never offered to them? You "count the blood of the covenant an unholy thing, and do despite unto the Spirit of grace §:" but this is a degree of iniquity with which they are not chargeable. What can equal the heinousness of your guilt? "How shall you escape, if you neglect so great salvation ||?" O, be persuaded, while opportunity is allowed you, to "flee from the wrath to come!"

\* Luke xi. 22. † Psal. xci. 3, 4. ‡ 1 Pet. ii. 4. § Heb. x. 29. || ii. 3.

## CONCLUSION.

## CONCLUSION.

## CHAP. XV.

*Self-examination recommended, as a proper improvement of "Scripture Characters."—Inquiries proposed: Are we among the saints, or the impenitent?—What is our state, conduct, and principles?—Are we "in the faith," and conformed to Jesus Christ, by virtue of a spiritual union with him?*

HAVING finished our plan of deducing practical reflections from Scripture examples, we may now close the subject by calling upon every reader to inquire whether he has made a suitable improvement. Religion does not consist in curious speculations: it is a personal concern. We ought not, therefore, to be satisfied with collecting or analyzing the historical accounts recorded in the sacred volume, or deciding upon the different people whose cases have passed in review before us: we should seriously consider what is our own spiritual state, and under what description we are to be classed. As the knowledge of ourselves is of far greater consequence than any other, we should direct all our studies to the attainment of that important object. How forcible, and how exactly adapted to our purpose, is the exhortation of the Apostle! "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates\*?" Let us attend to this solemn counsel, and pray that He, "unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid †," may search and try us, deliver

\* 2 Cor. xiii. 5.

† Communion Service.

us from all hypocrisy, "and lead us in the way everlasting."

It seems to have been the design of God, in allotting so large a portion of his word to the description of various characters, to fix our regard upon ourselves; and, without such a particular application, it is not probable that we shall reap any solid advantage from Scripture history. While we are forming an opinion concerning the celebrated names of antiquity, let each one ask, What am I to be accounted of? "Enoch had this testimony, that he pleased God \*;" but do I possess any evidence of a similar kind? I read that "Abraham was called the friend of God †;" but am I a child of Abraham? Moses is represented as peculiarly eminent for his meekness of spirit: am not I carried away by the influence of pride, envy, and revenge? While I behold the holy life of Jesus, the Son of God, is not the tenour of my conduct totally opposite? Though I perceive and approve the zeal, courage, and assiduity of his Apostles, am not I destitute of fervent love to his name and concern for his glory, being indolent, fearful, and unbelieving?

If we pursue these inquiries through the Scriptures, to what conclusion will they lead us? But the scrutiny proposed is unpleasant, and most persons start back from it as conscious of a defect, and aware that their accounts are bad. We apprehend that many study the sacred writings merely to gratify their curiosity in speculating upon the various characters there exhibited, and indulge a proud censorious disposition in passing sentence upon them, while they are averse to a serious examination of their own hearts. Are we then at liberty to neglect the repeated injunctions given us to "search and try our ways ‡," and "prove our own work §?" Or is the examination of no consequence? If our state be safe, it will have a happy tendency to fill our minds with confidence and joy: and on this ground it seems highly necessary, even

\* Heb. xi. 5. † James ii. 23. ‡ Lam. iii. 40. § Gal. vi. 4.

to advanced Christians, in order that they may be preserved in peace, and encouraged to pursue the great object of their high calling with increasing ardour. But, granting that we may possibly remain under the divine displeasure, is it not peculiarly desirable to be apprized of our danger? And are we not most likely, by a faithful inquiry, to discover our mistakes, and the way of obtaining deliverance? In such a case, surely, a supine indifference about the event is unpardonable, and must be expected to terminate in final destruction. The duty here recommended may appear difficult; but it ought not therefore to be declined. The chief difficulty to be removed is our disinclination to every thing truly spiritual; and this circumstance, so far from being an excuse, furnishes an additional reason for applying to the work in the most vigorous manner.

In the sacred records we meet with different and opposite descriptions of men. Some were confessedly dear to God and eminent in holiness, "a peculiar people, zealous of good works." The question, then, arises, Do we resemble them in temper, principle, and practice? If we compare ourselves with Noah, Daniel, and Job, what likeness do we discover? Noah maintained his integrity, and "walked with God," in a time of general depravity, when the earth was deluged with wickedness. The conduct of Daniel was so circumspect and unblamable, that his malignant accusers were constrained to say, "We shall not find any occasion against him, except we find it concerning the law of his God:" and such was the fervour of his piety, that he chose rather to be cast into a den of lions than abandon his religion. Job was perplexed and almost overwhelmed with accumulated afflictions and violent temptations; but, in the midst of his sharpest distresses, he possessed a firm dependence on his God, and showed an uncommon measure of meekness and submission. If we turn to the New Testament, we behold the Apostles of the Lord, men who spent their strength,

and cheerfully hazarded their lives for the name of Jesus: we follow them to their deaths, and see many sealing the faith with their blood. Do we trace in any of these persons a representation of our own character? Are we actuated by similar dispositions? If otherwise, if we be in every respect totally opposite, how can we hope with them to inherit the promises?

The Scriptures exhibit instances of those who were the avowed adversaries of the Lord, and lived in open disobedience to his government. Cain is described as the enemy of true religion, the persecutor, and at length the murderer, of his righteous brother. Pharaoh appears as a daring rebel, unhumiliated under the most tremendous judgments, and hardening his heart in defiance of the God of heaven. Judas, the apostate disciple of our Lord, is introduced as an example of the pernicious tendency of covetousness, betraying his Master for a sordid bribe. In Herod, the bloody king, who harassed the church, we behold a proud and presumptuous sinner suddenly checked in his career, and stripped of his glory. While we mark their prevailing tempers, let us ask, Are we not under the influence of the same vile affections, or of others equally detestable? Let us, then, not be satisfied with condemning them, but pass an impartial judgment upon ourselves; and, whereinsoever we have perversely violated our duty, let us with shame and contrition acknowledge our own baseness.

From these considerations we shall be led to inquire,

1. What is our state? There is an immense difference between the condition of a child of God, who is an heir of heaven, and that of an impenitent sinner, obnoxious to eternal wrath. We should examine, therefore, with which of these we may expect our final portion. We are all by nature depraved and prone to evil: are we renewed in righteousness, through the efficacious, but mysterious, agency of the Holy Spirit? We are transgressors of the divine law,  
and,

and, as such, liable to suffer everlasting misery. Is the sentence cancelled? Or is there any plea with which we can arrest the arm of justice ready to take vengeance? Who shall interpose in our behalf? There is One, of high dignity, who "hath made peace through the blood of his cross," obtained "reconciliation for iniquity, and brought in everlasting righteousness." Are we truly acquainted with his character? Or have we applied by faith for the blessings of his salvation? It were absurd and presumptuous to conclude favourably concerning our own state, unless "we have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us\*." But if, through the merits of the Saviour, we possess an humble confidence towards God, we should ask further,

2. What is the tenour of our conduct? Is it such as to prove indisputably the strength and excellence of our religious principles? We should judge according to our Lord's rule, "By their fruits ye shall know them †;" and therefore it will be proper to inquire, What do we bring forth? Do we produce the fruit of a good or of a corrupt tree? Are we so impressed with the importance of eternal things as evidently to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness?" Does it appear from our actions that we "set the Lord always before us," and live as in his presence? Do we show, by an uniform consistent behaviour, that we are truly devoted to Him, and desirous to do his whole will? Do we, then, abandon every wrong course, and pay a serious regard to every known duty, though tempted to transgress by general custom, worldly convenience, or carnal inclination? Such, at least, will be the case with real Christians. After making all proper allowances for human infirmities and natural depravity, still we must maintain, agreeably to St. John's declaration, that every man, who possesses the hope of the Gospel, "purifieth himself, even as God is

\* Heb. vi. 19.

† Matt. xiii. 20.

pure."

pure\*." If any thing short of this high attainment satisfy our consciences, if there be any iniquity which we determine to hold fast, any kind or measure of holiness to which we do not aspire, let us not presume on our professions; our religion is vain.

Though we are persuaded that our outward conduct will stand the test, we should examine, likewise,

3. What are our motives and affections? This is a necessary scrutiny, in order to determine the nature of our obedience; since no action can be good, or acceptable before God, which springs not from a right principle. "Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart †." With respect, therefore, to formalists and hypocrites, "that which is highly esteemed amongst men is abomination in the sight of God ‡." The tremendous declaration should put us upon searching our inward parts, however painful the task may be. Do we not there discover treachery and corruption? But let us inquire whether the grace of God has subdued the depravity of our fallen nature, and implanted holy dispositions. What is the end which we propose to ourselves in forming our habits or regulating our conduct? Under what influence do we practise those things which we know to be required? With what views do we frequent the divine ordinances? Are we actuated by an unfeigned regard to God? Whence proceed our honesty, temperance, and frugality? Are we in these respects serving God, or consulting our own interests and reputation? What disposes us to works of benevolence? Are we constrained by the love of Christ, and not induced by pride or fashion? The apostolical direction is, "Whether ye eat or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God §:" are we living by that exalted maxim? It is allowed that eminent Christians experience a severe conflict from the corrupt desires of the flesh; but these they are unable to resist. If carnal principles and tempers possess an habitual

\* 1 John iii. 3. † 1 Sam. xvi. 7. ‡ Luke xvi. 15. § 1 Cor. x. 31.  
ascendancy,

ascendancy, it will avail us nothing that we possess a fair character; our hearts are unsound, and what we boast of as duties are rather to be put down in the list of transgressions, for which we should implore forgiveness. May He, "who searcheth the reins," enable us to pass a right judgment!

It may be useful to pursue the inquiries which St. Paul has suggested, and to examine,

1. "Whether we be in the faith." It is not enough that we assent to the truth of revelation in general, or maintain the whole system of Christian doctrines. If such an external profession had been sufficient, the Apostle's exhortation to the Corinthians would have been unnecessary. But, alas! nominal believers, as we perceive in numerous instances, may be destitute of the true saving knowledge of the Redeemer; and therefore we should ever be reminded that "the form" without "the power of godliness" is unavailing. We must understand and feel the influence of our principles. It is of importance that we "hold fast the form of sound words," and "contend earnestly for the faith:" but the Gospel requires more than mere speculative opinions. It commands us to possess a supreme regard to the Lord Jesus Christ, as the Saviour of sinners, and an entire dependence upon him for all spiritual blessings. To be "in the faith" is to live in the habitual exercise of such a disposition towards Christ, expecting pardon, peace, holiness, and heaven, as the gift of his love, and as the purchase of the blood of his cross.

This is the distinguishing temper of a Christian, and is of all others most indispensably requisite. Without such an attachment to the Son of God, we must renounce our claim to the precious promises of the new covenant; for they are given only to them that believe. Without it our best morality is essentially defective; and, however valuable it may be in society, it cannot be acceptable to God. The proper foundation being wanting, the superstructure will fail. Do we, then, feel that our warmest affections

are placed upon the Saviour? and are we continually looking to him for renewed communications of his grace? Do all our hopes centre in him; and do we derive from him, by fresh applications, increase of light, strength, and comfort? Can we adopt St. Paul's declaration, and say, "The life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me \*?"

We should search still further, and inquire,

2. Whether "Jesus Christ is in us." This doubtless implies that we possess his temper and disposition; and such will be the effect of a right knowledge of his character, and dependence on his grace. Those who "behold his glory are changed into the same image †." They "have put on Christ ‡;" and "as He is, so are they in this world §." For this reason, "He that saith he abideth in him, ought himself also so to walk, even as he walked ||." Let us seriously contemplate the perfect Pattern of all righteousness, and "learn of him ¶." We have seen many bright examples among the ancient saints; but their glory vanishes before the superior lustre of this splendid Luminary, as the stars before the sun. Have we been so struck with the view of his excellence as to be filled with admiration, and transformed into a holy suitable resemblance?

He was "meek and lowly in heart;" "sought not his own glory," and maintained an uninterrupted fervour of devotion and *secret communion with God*. He was "not of the world," but "separate from sinners," and yet touched with the tenderest compassion for the miseries of mankind; he was merciful, patient, forgiving, and even prayed for his murderers. He yielded a perfect and cheerful obedience, and, through the ardour of his zeal, accounted it "his meat to do the will of Him that sent him, and to finish his work." Such was the Saviour: but is this the pattern which we have proposed for our own

\* Gal. ii. 20.

† 2 Cor. iii. 18.

‡ Gal. iii. 27.

§ 1 John iv. 17.

|| 1 John ii. 6.

¶ Matt. xi. 29.

imitation?

imitation? If we have "received Christ Jesus the Lord," do we "walk in him \*?" Is the same "mind in us, which was also in Christ Jesus †?" Are we so conformed to him, that those who look at us may behold his likeness? How many, alas! are totally opposite? The proud, the covetous, the lustful, the profane, the sensual, the contentious, and revengeful, will not pretend, surely, that they are among the followers of the Lamb. May they feel a deep conviction of their guilt, and confess with godly sorrow that they are entire strangers to the religion of the Gospel!

But, when the Apostle says to believers, "Jesus Christ is in you," the words imply more than a mere imitation or resemblance of his character. We may fairly infer from them that his people are joined to him by the agency of the Spirit, and favoured with his gracious residence in their hearts. No man, indeed, attains a likeness of disposition to the Saviour, but "by the renewing of the Holy Ghost." This divine influence is the more to be insisted on, because it is denied by many, who boast of the sufficiency of their own unassisted strength. The proud advocates for what is improperly termed a rational system of theology sneer at the notion of a spiritual union with Christ, as if it existed only in the wild imaginations of enthusiasts. Let us, however, without dreading reproach, receive the doctrine on the authority of the inspired writers, and pray, with St. Paul, "that Christ may dwell in our hearts by faith ‡." Let us rejoice in those kind assurances of our Redeemer; for they are big with consolation: "He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him §." "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me ||."

Believers, then, maintain a delightful intercourse

\* Col. ii. 6.

† Phil. ii. 5.

‡ Eph. iii. 17.

§ John vi. 56.

|| Rev. iii. 20.

with

with their exalted Lord. He guides and conducts them in the way wherein they should go: he strengthens them with might for the work assigned them; he purifies them from their corruptions, for his service and glory, and comforts them by decided tokens and clear manifestations of his love. Is this what we can testify from our own knowledge? Have we such an evidence of true religion in our souls? Our doubts and apprehensions should excite us to greater earnestness in making and pursuing these inquiries: nor should we rest till we perceive good reason to conclude that "Christ is formed in us\*." The precept, which requires us to examine ourselves, implies that it is possible to arrive at such a conclusion on satisfactory grounds. "Know ye not your own selves?" said the Apostle. An ignorance of this kind, we observe, is spoken of as disgraceful to Christians. What will it avail us to be acquainted with the whole of "Scripture Characters?" The grand inquiry now is, and will be at the last, What is our own?

Is it thought that the matter here insisted on is of trivial moment? It should be recollected, that, "if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his †." It is also solemnly declared that "Jesus Christ is in you, EXCEPT YE BE REPROBATES ‡." The supposition is indeed alarming; yet let not the expression be perverted. None are rejected of God as "reprobates," or doomed to eternal misery by an absolute decree, without regard to the state and disposition of their hearts. We must however maintain, agreeably to this description, that those, who are "alienated from the life of God," cannot be acceptable to him: after much trial, they are disapproved, like refuse metal, which is so full of dross as to be unfit for use; and therefore they are abandoned, and finally cast away. Who shall presume to object to such a procedure? Is it not consistent with every principle of truth and equity? It is

\* Gal. iv. 19.

† Rom. viii. 9.

‡ 2 Cor. xiii. 5.

evident,

evident, that, without a renovation of mind, through the influence of the Spirit, we must necessarily be excluded from the presence of God for ever. O, let us pray that He would "make us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light \*!"

We attempt not to deny or conceal the tremendous sentence, that "the wrath of God cometh upon the children of disobedience †." But, "knowing the terror of the Lord, we persuade men" to embrace the offers of his mercy. We solemnly warn them of impending destruction, and entreat them, with earnestness, not to trifle away their present opportunities. Through the whole of these practical reflections we have endeavoured to keep in view the sad case of impenitent sinners, and engage their attention to the serious consideration of their danger. And, if any such should cast their eyes upon these pages, we now again, in the conclusion, press them to examine themselves before they be summoned to that strict and decisive scrutiny at the judgment-seat of Christ. Then indeed will every character be clearly discovered: we shall "discern between the righteous and the wicked ‡." But then also will the state of every individual be determined beyond the possibility of a change. O, give diligence to flee from the wrath to come, and to obtain "inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in Jesus Christ §!"

It is presumed that many of our readers are among the faithful disciples of the Saviour; and the subjects here treated seem especially calculated to promote their edification and comfort. The writer will rejoice to be instrumental towards their spiritual advancement; and therefore, in a peculiar manner, he bespeaks their attention. Possibly you may be unnoticed and scorned in the midst of a sinful generation. But be encouraged to "hold on your way," in the defiance of all difficulties and opposition. "The world knoweth you not, because it knew not

\* Col. i. 12.

† Eph. v. 6.

‡ Mal. iii. 18.

§ Acts xxvi. 18.

Him"

Him \*” whom you serve. In this view you will not complain of contemptuous treatment. Consider, also, the examples of the most eminent saints. You are followers of them who are now inheriting the promises. Their holy conduct will instruct you, their present happiness will enliven your hopes.

Soon shall you be admitted to a state of delightful intercourse with those exalted personages whose characters you have been contemplating. You shall join with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with Moses and Elijah, with Peter, John, and Paul, in admiring and praising the God of your salvation. You shall come “to the general assembly and church of the first-born, which are written in heaven †;” and unite with angels and archangels, as well as with the illustrious company of martyrs, prophets, and apostles, in ascribing “blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever ‡.” Will not the prospect support and animate you, while you press forward with determined vigour? Let it be your great concern to recommend religion, both by your life and death. And may God grant that he who writes and all who read these pages may be able to say with St. Paul, in the view of an approaching dissolution, “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing §!” Amen.

\* 1 John iii. 1. † Heb. xii. 23. ‡ Rev. v. 13. § 2 Tim. iv. 7, 8.

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