

Charles Simeon Sermons on 1 Samuel

1 Samuel Sermons Charles Simeon

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HANNAH'S SONG OF THANKSGIVING

1 Sam. 2:1–10. And Hannah prayed, and said, My heart rejoiceth in the Lord, mine horn is exalted in the Lord; my mouth is enlarged over mine enemies; because I rejoice in thy salvation. There is none holy as the Lord: for there is none beside thee: neither is there any rock like our God. Talk no more so exceeding proudly; let not arrogancy come out of your mouth: for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty men are broken, and they that stumbled are girded with strength. They that were full have hired out themselves for bread; and they that were hungry ceased: so that the barren hath born seven; and she that hath many children is waxed feeble. The Lord killeth, and maketh alive; he bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up. The Lord maketh poor, and maketh rich: he bringeth low, and lifteth up. He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory: for the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and he hath set the world upon them. He will keep the feet of his saints, and the wicked shall be silent in darkness; for by strength shall no man prevail. The adversaries of the Lord shall be broken to pieces; out of heaven shall he thunder upon them: the Lord shall judge the ends of the earth; and he shall give strength unto his King, and exalt the horn of his Anointed.

THE return which mankind in general make to God for his mercies is, to idolize the gift, and forget the Giver. Directly opposite to this is the conduct of those who are truly pious: they value the gift only in proportion to its real worth, and rise in heavenly contemplations to the Donor himself; thus making the creature an occasion of exalting and magnifying the Creator. We observe this particularly in

the history of Hannah, whose devout acknowledgments we have just recited. She had been greatly afflicted on account of her not bearing any child to her husband Elkanah, whilst Peninnah, who was his other wife, had borne several. Her grief was daily augmented by the unkind behaviour of Peninnah; nor could all the kindness and love that she experienced from her husband, remove it. She carried her complaints therefore to the Lord, who alone was able to relieve them: unto him she vowed, that if he would grant her a son, she would dedicate him to the service of the sanctuary, and that he should be a Nazarite from the womb. Having obtained her request from God, she now came to perform her vow: as soon as the child could with any propriety be separated from her, it is thought at three or four years old, she took him with her to the tabernacle at Shiloh, and there, for the whole remainder of his days, "lent him to the Lord." At the time of surrendering him up, she burst forth in this song of praise and thanksgiving, in which she takes occasion, from the mercy vouchsafed to her, to adore the goodness of God as manifested towards the whole creation. She mentions,

I. The perfections of his nature—

Unless we are fully aware of the desire which the Jewish women felt to have the Messiah spring from them, we shall not be able to account for the extreme grief occasioned by barrenness, or for the exultation arising from the birth of a child. But to all the common grounds of joy which Hannah had in the birth of Samuel, that of her deliverance from the taunts and insults of her rival was a great addition: and to that she had especial respect in the opening of this song——But, after this slight mention of her own particular case, she proceeds to celebrate,

1. The power and holiness of God—

[God does not always interpose in this world to display his hatred of sin, or to vindicate the oppressed; because there is a day coming, when he will rectify all the present inequalities of his moral government: but he does not leave himself altogether without witness, that he is a righteous Governor, and a powerful Avenger. His effectual interposition on this occasion was, in Hannah's eyes, a decisive proof, yea and a glorious exhibition too, of his holiness and power; and gave her an assurance, that as these perfections were essential to his nature, and unbounded in their extent, so they should ever be called forth into activity in behalf of all who should trust in him——]

2. His wisdom and equity—

[Great was her consolation, that whilst she was judged uncharitably by her fellow-creatures, she had One to whom she could commit her cause; One who was privy to every thought of her heart, and would put a just construction upon the whole of her conduct: and, in the contemplation of this truth, she exulted over those who had so proudly and so arrogantly condemned her. And truly this is one of the richest sources of consolation that any person can have, when suffering under misrepresentations or calumnies of whatever kind: yea, it is quite sufficient to tranquillize the mind, and to raise it above all those feelings which oppression is calculated to produce——]

II. The dispensations of his providence—

[Here the pious Hannah extends her views from herself to the world at large; and declares, that the change thus produced in her state, is illustrative of what is done by God throughout the whole creation. In the events of war—in the enjoyment of plenty—in the increase of families—in the continuance of life—in the possession of wealth—and in advancement to honour—who does not see that the greatest changes take place, even when least expected? and who therefore must not be convinced of the folly of indulging either presumptuous confidence, on the one hand, or desponding fears on the other? None can say, "I am so strong, I shall never be moved;" nor ought any one to say, "There is no hope;" the afflicted should "weep, as though they wept not;" and the prosperous "rejoice, as though they rejoiced not;" each being aware that their condition may soon be altered, and shall be, if God see it on the whole conducive to their good.]

III. The purposes of his grace—

From a view of temporal concerns, she rises to those which are spiritual and eternal: indeed here her words are evidently prophetic, and relate,

1. To the Church—

[She had found to her joy what care God takes of his people: and she confidently declared, that that care should be extended to all his saints, even to the end of time. Their adversaries might lay snares for their feet; but HE would "keep their feet;" he would "keep them from falling, and present them faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy"——On the other hand, his adversaries should assuredly be confounded by him: however they might vindicate themselves now, they should soon "be silent in darkness;" and though now they might defy him, as it were, to his face, he would thunder upon them out of heaven, and utterly, yea eternally, destroy them——]

2. To the Church's King, the Messiah himself—

[As yet there had been no king in Israel; nor was there for fifty years afterwards: and therefore it is reasonable to think that she spake of Him, whose throne was in due time to be erected in the hearts of men, even the Lord Jesus Christ. This further appears

from her characterising him by the very name Messiah, a name never before assigned to the king of Israel, but henceforth intended to designate him before all others; the Messiah, the Anointed, and the Christ, being all terms of precisely the same import. That she spake of Him, yet further appears by the marked resemblance between this song, and that which the blessed Virgin poured forth at the prospect of the Saviour's birth. His triumph then she firmly predicts; and declares that his kingdom shall be extended even to "the ends of the earth." Many efforts will be made to prevent its establishment in the world; but none shall prevail: "his horn shall be exalted," and all his enemies shall perish.

It may be asked, What had this to do with the particular occasion of Hannah's thanksgiving? I answer, It is this very thing which constitutes in a very great degree the beauty of this song, and that marks the effects of ardent piety upon the soul: a single mercy, like a stream, leads the soul up to the Fountain-head: and it is then only improved aright, when we take occasion from it to contemplate the fulness that is treasured up there, and that is diffusing all possible blessings, temporal and spiritual, throughout the world: and, inasmuch as the universal reign of Christ is that which will bring most glory to God and most good to men, it ought ever to be uppermost in our minds; and every mercy we enjoy should lead us ultimately to the contemplation of it.]

We may LEARN then from hence,

1. The benefit of prayer—

[See how successful she was, though she uttered no words, but only importuned God in her heart! And what will God refuse to those who seek him in sincerity and truth?—The Saviour's promise to us all is this, "Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, I will do it;" "Ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you."

Let all the sons and daughters of affliction bear this in mind. Here is a sure remedy for all their griefs, and an infallible supply for all their wants.]

2. The blessedness of true religion—

[Exceeding heavy were Hannah's trials: and they were not a little aggravated by the uncharitable surmises of Eli himself. But into what holy joy were they turned at last! Thus, when true religion occupies the soul, will even the most afflictive dispensations be overruled for good: our night of sorrow may appear long; but the morning of joy shall soon arise: our seed-time of tears shall be followed with a blessed harvest. Only let us delight in heavenly contemplations, and every perfection of God's nature, every dispensation of his providence, and every purpose of his grace, shall swell, as it were, our tide of joy, till it becomes "unspeakable and glorified."]

CCLXXXIII

THE DANGER OF NEGLECTING THE GREAT SACRIFICE

1 Sam. 2:25. If one man sin against another, the judge shall judge him: but if a man sin against the Lord, who shall entreat for him?

THE consideration of an earthly tribunal is of great use to restrain the wickedness of ungodly men. But as there are innumerable offences which can neither be proved by human testimony, nor defined by human laws, it is necessary that men should be reminded of another tribunal, to which they shall be shortly summoned, and before which they shall be called to a strict account. Long before the deluge this was a topic much enforced by the preachers of religion; and Eli adverted to it, as well calculated to enforce his exhortations, and to dissuade his sons from their impieties. His sons were transgressors of no common stamp: they are justly reprobated as sons of Belial. Their father being advanced in years, the administration of the priestly office had devolved to them. This office they abused to the purposes of oppression and debauchery. The interposition of their father became highly necessary: as God's vicegerent, he should have vindicated the honour of God, and the rights of his subjects. He should have interposed, not only with parental but judicial authority. He should not only have manifested his detestation of their lewdness and rapacity, but should have punished them with degradation. He however, either from a timidity and supineness incident to age, or from a shameful partiality for his own children, forbore to inflict the punishment they deserved; and contented himself with expostulations and reproofs. He said to them, "Why do ye such things? for I hear of your evil doings by all this people. Nay, my sons: for it is no good report that I hear; ye make the Lord's people to transgress. If one man sin against another, the judge shall judge him; but if a man sin against the Lord, who shall entreat for him?" With less hardened criminals these words might have produced a good effect: for if it be awful to be summoned before an earthly judge, how much more so to be called into the presence of God, laden with iniquities, and destitute of any advocate or intercessor!

May our minds be impressed with reverence and godly fear, while we consider the import of this admonition, and deduce from it some suitable and important observations!

The words of the text do not at first sight appear to need much explanation: but we cannot well understand the antithesis, or see the force of the interrogation, without adverting particularly to the circumstances, which occasioned the reproof. The sense is not, That, if a man violate an human law, he shall be condemned by an earthly judge; and, that if he violate the divine law, he shall be

condemned by God himself: this is far short of its real import.

The sin which the sons of Eli had committed was of a peculiar nature. They, as priests, had a right to certain parts of all the sacrifices that were offered: but, instead of being contented with the parts which God had allotted them, and of burning the fat according to the divine appointment, they sent their servants to strike their flesh-hooks of three teeth into the pot or caldron where the meat was seething, and to take whatsoever the flesh-hook might bring up. If they came before the flesh was put into the caldron, they demanded it raw, together with all the fat that was upon it. If the people objected to such lawless proceedings, or reminded them that they must not forget to burn the fat, the servants were ordered to take away the meat immediately, and by force. To these enormities, the young men added others of a most malignant nature: they, who, from their office, should have been ministers of justice, and patterns of all sanctity, availed themselves of their situation to seduce the women, when they came to worship at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. Thus they discouraged the people from even coming to the house of God, and caused them to "abhor the offering of the Lord."

Now it should be recollected that sacrifices were the instituted means of reconciliation with God: there was no other way in which any offence, whether ceremonial or moral, could be purged, but by the offering of the appointed sacrifice before the door of the tabernacle: without shedding of blood there was to be no remission.

It should be remembered further, that these sacrifices were typical of the great sacrifice which Christ was in due time to offer upon the cross. The whole Epistle to the Hebrews was written to establish and illustrate this point. "The blood of bulls and of goats could never take away sin:" they had no efficacy at all, but as they typified him who was to "appear in this last dispensation to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself."

In causing therefore the offerings of the Lord to be thus abhorred, the young men sinned in a peculiar manner against God himself: they poured contempt upon the very means which God had provided for their obtaining of pardon and reconciliation with him. Thus they rendered their situation desperate: had they only committed some heinous offence against man, a judge, intrusted with the execution of the laws, might have arbitrated between the parties: he might have punished the delinquents, and obtained satisfaction for the injured person: and, the offenders, if truly penitent, might have brought their offering to God, and thus, through the blood of their sacrifice and the intercession of the priest, have obtained the remission of their sin. But they had sinned immediately against God himself; so that there was no third person to redress the grievance or settle the dispute. Moreover they had despised the only atonement that could be offered for them: yea, in despising the typical, they had, in fact, disclaimed all trust in the real atonement. What hope then remained for them? Having provoked God, they had no person of authority sufficient to arbitrate between them: and having rejected the only Sacrifice, the only Advocate, the great High-priest, they had none to make atonement for them, they had none to intercede: they must therefore be left to their fate, and reap the bitter fruits of their iniquities. In confirmation of this, God declared that "their sin should not be purged by sacrifice or offering for ever."

With this explanation we see at once the force and emphasis of the words before us. They were intended to express the exceeding heinousness of the sins that had been committed, and to deter the offenders from persisting in such fatal conduct. While they intimate the danger to which a violation of human laws will expose us, they insinuate the infinitely greater danger we incur by contemning the only means of forgiveness with God.

With the additional light which the New Testament reflects on this passage, we may see that we are as much interested in this admonition, as the very persons were, to whom it was first given: for, though we have not run to their excess of riot, or caused the offering of the Lord to be so abhorred, yet we have too much disregarded the sacrifice of the Son of God. If we have not openly opposed the atonement of Christ, we have been, perhaps still are, too indifferent about it. The censure therefore in the text, how severe soever it may appear, lies in full force against us. To neglect the Saviour is in a most fatal manner to sin against God: it is, at the same time, to provoke the Majesty of heaven, and to reject the only Advocate, the only Propitiation for sin. Hence the Apostle asks with such tremendous energy, "How shall ye escape if ye neglect so great salvation?" Which question, both in import and expression, accords with that in our text, "If a man sin against the Lord, who shall entreat for him?"

In this application of the passage we are countenanced by a parallel passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews, "If we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries." Here the writer states the reason why an apostate from the truth has nothing to expect but wrath and fiery indignation; the reason is the same as in our text; he has turned his back on the sacrifice of Christ, and there will be no other sacrifice for sin to all eternity: there is therefore no hope of salvation for him. The Apostle then adds, "He that despised Moses' law, died without mercy, under two or three witnesses: of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite to the Spirit of grace?" Thus may we ask, in reference to the text, If the infraction of human laws, when substantiated by sufficient evidence, be ever punished with the loss of life, how much more shall a neglect and contempt of Christ meet with due recompence from an holy and omniscient God?

The text being thus explained, we may proceed to deduce from it some important observations.

The solemnity of the present occasion requires us to take some notice of human judicatures: we shall not however restrict our observations to them: there is a future judgment to which we must look forward; nor should we satisfy your expectations any more than our own conscience, if we did not principally advert to that. The text affords us a proper opportunity for discharging our duty in both respects.

We observe then,

I. That the dispensing of justice by persons duly qualified and authorized, is an unspeakable blessing to a nation. The institution of judges is a necessary part of every well-ordered government. When God called his people Israel, and formed them into a distinct nation by his servant Moses, he gave this command; "Judges and officers shalt thou make thee in all thy gates which the Lord thy God giveth thee throughout all thy tribes; and they shall judge the people with just judgment." When Jehoshaphat set himself to restore the political and religious welfare of his kingdom, he paid immediate attention to this point: "he set judges in the land throughout all the fenced cities of Judah, city by city; and said to the judges, Take heed what ye do; for ye judge not for man, but for the Lord, who is with you in judgment." After the Babylonish captivity also, when the Persian monarch gave commandment respecting the re-establishment of the Jews in their own land, he particularly enjoined Ezra to be mindful of this matter: "Thou, Ezra, after the wisdom of thy God that is in thine hand, set magistrates and judges, which may judge all the people that are beyond the river: and whosoever will not do the law of thy God, and the law of the king, let judgment be executed speedily upon him, whether it be unto death, or to banishment, or to confiscation of goods, or to imprisonment." Indeed, without such an institution, the laws themselves would be altogether vain and useless: the weak would sink under oppression; and the strong tyrannize with impunity. The bonds of society would be broken asunder; and universal anarchy would prevail. We have witnessed the destruction of all constituted authorities, and the utter annihilation of all established laws. We have beheld licentiousness stalking with the cap of liberty, and ferocious despotism, under the name of equality, spreading desolation with an indiscriminating hand. But, blessed be God, it is not thus with Britain: I pray God it never may be. The laws, with us, are respected; and they, who superintend the execution of them, are revered. If one man sin against another, we have judges, who are competent, and not afraid, to judge him. If existing laws are not sufficient to check the progress of conspiracy and treason, we have a legislature, that will deliberate with coolness, and enact with wisdom. If the necessary restraints be violated by presumptuous demagogues, we have magistrates, that will call the offenders to trial; juries, that will bring in their verdict with conscientious truth; and judges, that, while they declare the sentence of the law with firmness, know how to temper judgment with mercy. Yes, to their united efforts, under the care of Providence, we owe it, that faction and sedition have been disarmed of the power, would to God I might also add, the inclination, to disturb the realm.

However the opinions of many were shaken for a time by specious arguments and groundless cavils, there are but few, it is hoped, at this time, whose eyes have not been opened to discern the excellence of our constitution. Who, that has seen insulted majesty proclaiming pardon to mutiny and sedition; who that, when the contemners of that pardon were brought to trial, has seen the very judges becoming counsel for the accused; who, that has seen to what an amazing extent lenity has been carried (not from partiality or supineness, as under Eli's administration, but from a love of mercy, and a desire to win the offenders to a sense of duty) who, that reflects how forbearance has been exercised, insomuch that not a single execution even of the most daring traitors took place, till lenient measures absolutely defeated their own ends; who, I say, that has seen these things, must not acknowledge the equity and mildness of our government? And who, that knows the value of such a government, would not uphold it to the utmost of his power? While we are speaking upon this subject, it is impossible to omit the mention of one, who with unexampled fortitude has stemmed the torrent of iniquity in this country, and has made the most opulent to know, that if they will tempt the chastity of individuals, and destroy the peace of families, they shall do it at their peril. I do not hesitate to say, that every father of a family, and every lover of virtue in this kingdom, stands indebted to him, and has reason to bless God, that such integrity and power are combined in one person.

There is one other point worthy to be noticed in the judicatories of this country; I mean, a freedom from political or religious prejudice. If a man be known to disapprove the measures of government, he is not the less likely on that account to obtain justice in any cause in which he may be engaged: if he dissent from the established mode of worship, he is not the less protected in the right of serving God according to his conscience: nor, if on account of superior zeal and piety, he be branded with an ignominious name, will prejudice be suffered to bias the decisions of our courts against him. Every member of the community, of whatever denomination or description, is sure to have his cause attentively heard, and impartially determined.

These things cannot but create a love to our constitution in the mind of every man, who rightly appreciates the blessings of civil and religious liberty. And I pray God that the laws of our country may ever continue to be thus respected, and to be thus dispensed.

The observation now made, has been suggested by the first part of Eli's admonition. Another observation we may offer, arising from the obvious connexion which subsists between that and the latter member of the text; namely,

II. That there are many things, not cognizable by human laws, which will be brought to trial before the Judge of quick and dead. Man's tribunal is erected principally for judging things which particularly affect the welfare of society; and, in criminal causes, respect is had to actions rather than to thoughts, or at least to actions as the evidences of our thoughts. But at the tribunal of God, every thing which affected the divine government will be brought forward, the sins against God, as well as sins against our fellow-creatures; the sins of omission, as well as of commission; the sins of thought and desire, as well as those of purpose and of act. There is not any one action of our lives that will not then be weighed in the balance of the sanctuary; there is not a word of our lips, which will not then bear its proper stamp of piety, or transgression: there is not so much as a thought of our hearts, that will not receive its just mark of approbation or displeasure. We are expressly told, that "God in that day will judge the secrets of men; that he

will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and make manifest the counsels of the heart;" and that "he will then reward every man according to what he hath done, whether it be good or evil;" "to them, who by patient continuance in well-doing have sought for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life: but to them that were contentious, and obeyed not the truth, indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, even upon every soul of man that doeth evil." At that day, we are informed, "the Judge will come in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory;" and he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, even "with the voice of the archangel, and the trump of God." "Then shall the sea give up the dead which were in it, and death and hell deliver up the dead that were in them, and all, small and great, shall stand before God." "The Ancient of days, whose garment is white as snow, and the hair of whose head is like pure wool, will sit upon his fiery throne; and while a fiery stream issues from before him, and ten thousand times ten thousand minister unto him, he will open the books; the book of life, wherein the names of his people are written; the book of his remembrance, wherein the most secret imaginations of men's hearts were registered; the book of conscience too, which, however illegible now through our ignorance and partiality, will be found to correspond with his records in every particular; and lastly, the book of his law, according to which he will pass his judgment. Ah! who can reflect on the solemnities of that day, and not be filled with awe? Who amongst us can endure so strict a scrutiny? "Who can abide the day of his coming?" We may easily conceive the feelings of a prisoner, who, being to be tried for a capital offence, hears the trumpet announce the coming of his judge. Let us endeavour to realize the thought, and to apply it to our own case. We are sure that such a criminal would lose no time in preparing for his defence. He would engage his counsel, summon his witnesses, and employ every art in order to obtain a favourable sentence. Let us go and do likewise: our "time is short; the Judge is at the door," and if we be unprepared to meet him, woe be unto us; our sentence will be awful indeed: the very terms, in which it will be expressed, are already told us; "Depart, ye cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels." In one respect indeed we differ widely from such a criminal: if he escape, it must be through want of evidence to convict him: whereas the only way for us to escape is, to confess our guilt, and plead the atonement offered for us by the Son of God.

This leads me to my last observation, namely,

III. That a neglect of Christ will be found in that day to have been the most fatal of all offences. Sins of any other kind, how heinous soever they may have been, yea, though they may have brought us to an ignominious end, may yet be pardoned of our God, provided we turn to him with unfeigned sorrow and contrition, and rely on the atonement which Christ has offered. The Scriptures are extremely full and strong upon this subject. They declare that "all who believe, shall be justified from all things;" that "the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin;" that "though our sins be as scarlet they shall be as wool, though they be red like crimson they shall be white as snow." So undoubted is this truth, and so suited to the condition of fallen man, that it has been often and well proclaimed in our very courts of justice; proclaimed, I say, to criminals condemned, at the very time of condemnation, and that too, by those very persons who pronounced the sentence of death against them. Yes, thanks be to God, there are judges, even in this degenerate age, who are not ashamed to unite the balm of Christian counsel with the severity of a penal sentence.

But let us suppose that we have neither violated the laws of man, nor, in any flagrant instances, the laws of God; shall we therefore be acquitted at God's tribunal? Shall we need none to entreat for us, none to plead our cause in that day? May we safely neglect the sacrifice of Christ, because we have abstained from gross iniquities? Let us not deceive ourselves with any such dangerous imagination: "We all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;" "every mouth therefore must be stopped, and all the world must become guilty before God." None can stand upon the footing of his own righteousness. Having transgressed the law, we are cursed by the law; as it is written, "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them." We must therefore all, without exception, seek deliverance in Him, "who hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us." God has declared that "there is salvation in no other; that there is no other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved, but the name of Jesus Christ:" if we will not "enter by that door," we exclude ourselves from even a possibility of obtaining mercy to all eternity.

I know it will be urged in opposition to this, that we have been free from all gross offences, and have been punctual in the observance of many civil and religious duties. Be it so: but how would such a plea sound in a court of justice? Let a criminal, accused of rebellion against an earthly monarch, plead his allegiance to the King of kings; let him say, "I regarded his sacrifice, I trusted in the atonement, I sought an interest in Christ." Would his plea be valid? Would he not be told immediately, that these things he ought indeed to have done, and not have left the other undone? Thus then we answer those, who go about to establish their own righteousness instead of submitting to the righteousness of God; "It was well that you abstained from gross sin, and fulfilled many duties; but you ought also to have sought redemption through the blood of Christ; you ought to have fled for refuge to the hope set before you: and because you have neglected him, you have no part or lot in his salvation." What can be plainer than our Lord's own assertions, "No man cometh to the Father but by me;" and, "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part in me?" or what can be more awful than that interrogation of St. Peter, "What shall the end be of them that obey not the Gospel of God?" We may venture to put the question to the conscience of every considerate man; If you sin against God in neglecting and despising his dear Son, what atonement will you offer to him? If you make light of the sacrifice offered upon Calvary, where will you find another sacrifice for sin? If you disregard the mediation and intercession of Christ, where will you find another advocate? If you sin thus against God, who shall entreat for you?

Here then the subject wears a very serious and solemn aspect. We all are hastening to “the judgment-seat of Christ, where we must give account of ourselves to God.” There, high and low, rich and poor, judges and criminals, must all appear to receive their sentence of condemnation or acquittal; there will be no respect of persons with God: even the criminal who died by the hand of the executioner, provided that his disgraceful circumstances led him to reflection, and made him implore mercy through the blood of Jesus, shall stand a monument of redeeming grace: while his superiors in morality, yea, even the judge who condemned him, if they died in impenitence and unbelief, shall hear the sentence of condemnation pronounced against them, and be doomed to that “second death in the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone.”

Let us then inquire diligently into the state of our souls: let us “judge ourselves that we be not judged of the Lord.” Let us examine what regard we have paid, and are yet daily paying, to the sacrifice of Christ; let us inquire whether “He be all our salvation and all our desire?” And let us remember, that if we would have him to entreat for us in that day, we must now entreat him for ourselves, “desiring earnestly to be found in him, not having our own righteousness, but the righteousness of God which is by faith in him.”

CCLXXXIV

ELI'S UNFAITHFULNESS REPROVED

1 Sam. 2:30. Them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed.

HOWEVER the promises of God may be expressed, they are never so to be understood, as if they should be fulfilled to us whilst we are in a state of wilful sin: there is always in them an implied condition, that we depart from iniquity, and endeavour faithfully to serve the Lord. To Aaron a promise was made, that the priesthood should be continued in his family, and in that of Eleazar his son: yet for some wickedness of his descendants it was transferred from the family of Eleazar, his eldest son, to that of his younger son, Ithamar, from whom Eli was descended. Again the promise was made, that it should be continued in the line of Eli: but, for a similar reason, it was afterwards taken from Abiathar, his descendant, and given to Zadoc, who was of the elder branch. That the promises were to be understood with such limitations, God himself declares in this address to Eli; wherein he tells Eli, that he had rescinded the promise made to him, and determined to act towards him on the broad basis of equity, precisely as he would towards all mankind: “I said indeed that thy house, and the house of thy father, should walk before me for ever: but now the Lord saith, Be it far from me; for them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed.”

Here we may see,

I. What conduct God requires of us—

This will be best learned from a review of the context. Eli being far advanced in age, his sons performed the priestly office in his stead. But they abused their power to such a degree as to “make the offerings of the Lord to be abhorred.” Eli heard of their proceedings, and reproved them for their wickedness: but he neglected to exert that authority with which God had invested him; and manifested more regard for the feelings of his sons, than he did for the honour of his God. This was Eli's fault, and the occasion of God's heavy displeasure against him. From hence then we see what God requires of us: he expects us,

1. To have a supreme regard for his glory—

[The honour of God ought to be dear to every one of us: for though we cannot augment or diminish his essential glory, we may greatly affect the regards of men towards him, and be an occasion of his being either honoured or blasphemed by multitudes around us. In truth, there is not any thing we do, but has considerable influence of this kind. How careful then should we be, and how watchful, not to do any thing which may lower him in the esteem of men! The thought that should be ever uppermost in our minds, is this; “What aspect will such or such conduct have upon religion; and what effect will it produce in advancing or retarding its influence in the world?———”]

2. To promote it to the utmost of our power—

[To exemplify religion in our own conduct must be our first labour, and to shew all possible respect to every thing that relates to God. His word, his Sabbath, his name, his Gospel, his cause and interest in the world, must be exceeding high in our estimation. But we must not content ourselves with honouring God in our own persons; we must exert all our influence that he may be honoured by all around us. Some are invested with magisterial power; and they must use it for God, and not bear the sword in vain. To others is committed the ministry of the Gospel; and they must boldly reprove sin of every kind, and commend themselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. To others is parental authority intrusted; and they must not content themselves with gently rebuking the wickedness of their children, but must exert themselves to the uttermost to restrain it. Here was Eli's defect. He did well to begin with mild reproof: but he should have proceeded to severer measures, when he saw that they were not to be reclaimed by gentler means. In a word, we should be so intent on advancing the honour of God in the world, as to esteem nothing too much to do, nor any thing too great to suffer, for the attainment of our object: relations, interests, or life itself, should be of no account with us in comparison of this.]

Such being the conduct which God requires, let us consider,

II. In what light he will view it—

He will account himself “honoured” by our observance of it—

[Often does he speak to us to this effect: and in what sense we must understand the expression, has been before explained. Though “our goodness cannot extend to him,” or profit “him,” if he esteem himself glorified by it, it is quite sufficient for us: nor can we have any greater stimulus to exertion than such a consideration as this. To form a just estimate of it, let us only reflect on the zeal which is manifested by all the hosts of heaven to honour God: how do they all vie with each other in their songs of praise! And if an opportunity were afforded them to advance his honour by any offices on earth, how readily would they leave their blest abodes, and fly hither to execute his high commands! They are represented as “doing his commandments, and hearkening to the voice of his word,” to obey the first intimation of his will. Such is the zeal that should animate us; and God will assuredly consider himself as glorified by it: indeed he is glorified, inasmuch as our obedience proclaims to all around us, that he is, in our estimation at least, worthy of all the love that we can manifest, and of all the service that we can render him.]

But where such conduct is wanting, God accounts himself treated with contempt—

[Is there no medium between an honouring of God and a despising of him? I answer, No: if he be not honoured, something else is honoured above him, and the creature is set above the Most High God. It is said of Eli, that he “honoured his sons above God:” and this was considered by God as an instance of direct and absolute contempt. The same is true respecting every act of disobedience, and every neglect of duty; which necessarily implies an attention to our own ease, interest, or pleasure, in preference to the will of God. What a contempt of the Divine Majesty does it argue, when we resist his will! What a contempt of his love and mercy, when we neglect his salvation! What a contempt of his justice, his holiness, and his truth, when we entertain the idea that such conduct can pass with impunity! This is the very construction that God himself puts upon such conduct: “Wherefore doth the wicked contemn God, while he doth say in his heart, Thou, God, wilt not require it?”

If then we, poor, ignorant, guilty creatures, feel so keenly when we are treated with contempt, let us consider how indignantly the Most High God will resent such conduct at our hands.]

He himself has told us,

II. What notice he will take of it—

He will honour his faithful and obedient servants—

[This he has promised: and he will perform it. Men may treat them as if they were “the filth of the earth and the offscouring of all things;” (though they cannot help reverencing them in their hearts:) but God will honour them with the most distinguished tokens of his love. He “will give them a name better than of sons and of daughters,” and will enrich them with the inestimable blessings of grace and peace. Through their whole lives he will admit them to the nearest fellowship with himself: and what will he not do for them in the hour of death?—Yet all this falls infinitely short of the glory he will confer upon them in the future world. Read what testimonies of his approbation he will give them before the assembled universe, and with what honours he will invest them at his own right hand: verily they shall never have reason to complain that their fidelity to God has not been adequately rewarded.]

But those who have despised him shall be despised by him—

[Though they may be exalted among men, God will hold them in the utmost contempt. He will not vouchsafe to them so much as one kind look: but, on the contrary, in the hour of their greatest extremity, “he will laugh at their calamity, and mock when their fear cometh.” No consolations will he administer to them in a dying hour; but will rather hide his face from them, and shut his ear at the voice of their cry. And when they stand at his judgment-seat, he will bid them “depart accursed into everlasting fire,” regarding them no more than the chaff that is cast into the oven—They will then indeed “be lightly esteemed;” for they will “awake to shame and everlasting contempt.”]

Here then we may SEE,

1. What estimate we should form of lukewarm religion—

[That religion is most pleasing to men, which is regulated by the opinions of the world: but that alone is acceptable with God, which is agreeable to the standard of his revealed will. He requires our whole hearts; and looks with utter abhorrence upon the lukewarmness of a Laodicean state—Let us then not be contented with serving God in our closets; but let us confess him in the world: and let us not only serve him ourselves, but use all our influence to bring others also to a submission to his will. Yea, if all others should determinately reject his yoke, let us say, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”]

2. What alone we are to regard as the great object of our desire—

[“The honour that cometh of man” should be no further of any account with us, than it may augment our influence in serving God. It is the honour which cometh of God that alone deserves our concern. To have the witness of his Spirit and the testimony of our own conscience that we are pleasing God, is worthy of our most diligent pursuit. That will comfort us, when all other sources of consolation are cut off. Moreover, the approbation of God will continue, millions of ages after that the breath of man’s applause has vanished away. Let us then act to God, and live for God, and endeavour so to walk with him, that we may enjoy the light of his countenance: for “in his favour is life, and his loving-kindness is better than life itself.”]

ELI'S SUBMISSION TO THE DIVINE REBUKES

1 Sam. 3:18. And Samuel told him every whit, and hid nothing from him. And he said, It in the Lord: let him do what seemeth him good.

IT is of the nature of sin to harden the heart, and to prevent the declarations of God from having their due influence on the mind. It operates in this manner, wherever it is found: the righteous, no less than the wicked, experience the same effects, in proportion as it gains an ascendant over them. Eli had neglected to exert that authority, which, as God's high-priest, and as a parent, he ought to have exercised over his abandoned sons: and God sent a prophet to him, "a man of God," to reprove him, and to warn him of the judgments which his sin would bring both on himself and his posterity. But this message seems to have produced no good effect. God therefore used another method of awakening his conscience: he revealed himself to Samuel by an audible voice, and renewed to him the declarations, that had been before made in vain. The voice was new to Samuel; and, taking it for Eli's voice, he repeatedly attended on the aged priest: but when, according to the direction of Eli, he had requested the further manifestation of Gods will, he received from God the communication he desired. It does not appear that he would of himself have imparted to Eli the information he had received: but when adjured to it by Eli himself, he could not refrain.

The points for our present consideration are,

I. The fidelity of Samuel—

[The tidings were of a most dreadful nature: and to deliver them must have been a distressing office to Samuel. But Samuel was not elated by the revelation that had been made to him; nor was he hasty to denounce the judgments which he was commissioned to declare; yet on the other hand, when he was solemnly called upon to disclose the whole, he would not dissemble, nor conceal any thing; but related to Eli every minute particular.

In this we have an excellent model for God's servants in every age. They should deliver only what they themselves have received from God: nor, in delivering that, should they delight to denounce the judgments of God, or exult over those whom they are constrained to condemn: yet they should, with becoming fidelity, "declare the whole counsel of God:" they should "keep back nothing that can be profitable" to those to whom they are sent; but should "commend themselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God."

The consciousness of their own youth or weakness should not keep them from discharging their duty aright: they should declare the whole truth to all, whether old or young, professors or profane: "Having received God's word, they must speak his word faithfully.]"

Whilst we approve of the fidelity of Samuel, we must also of necessity admire,

II. The resignation of Eli—

[If the tidings were painful to Samuel to deliver, much more must they be so to Eli to hear: even to persons far less interested than he, they were sufficient to make "their ears to tingle." Yet Eli did not set himself against them, though delivered by a child: on the contrary, he submitted to the divine decree with humble resignation. He knew that God was too wise to err, and too good to inflict punishment without a cause. He knew also that he himself had sinned against the Lord, and well deserved the judgments that had been denounced against him. Hence the language of his heart was, "I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him."

This shews how we should receive all the denunciations of God's wrath against sin. We should not "puff at them," or harden ourselves against them, or think unkindly of those who set them before us; we should not with Pharisaic pride exclaim, "In so saying thou reproachest us:" but whatever God says in his word, by whomsoever it may be delivered, we should "receive it, not as the word of man, but as the word of God," precisely as much as if it had been spoken to us by an audible voice from heaven. Eternal judgments indeed we may deprecate, yea and ought to deprecate, with all our might: and even temporal calamities we may deprecate in submission to God: we may entreat him to remove the bitter cup, as fervently as we will, provided we add, "Nevertheless, not my will, but thine be done:" but we must acknowledge the justice of God even in his severest judgments, and be contented that our temporal happiness should be destroyed, if only "our spirits may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.]"

From this subject we may further LEARN,

1. The importance of exerting our influence for God—

[Eli had neglected to punish his sons for their great impieties: he had reprov'd them indeed; but when he found the inefficiency of lenient reproofs, he had neglected to adopt severer measures. This was the sin which excited God's displeasure against him, and occasioned the utter ruin of his whole family. How strongly does this apply to every individual amongst us! and how urgently does it call upon us to exert our influence, whatever it may be, for God! Let us not say, "Am I my brother's keeper?" If others are bold in the service of the devil, we should be bold in the service of our God: "we must in any wise reprove our brother, and not suffer sin upon

him." Our influence is as much a talent as our time, or money, or any thing else; and we ought to use it for God. We should not be contented to go to heaven alone, but should endeavour to carry all we can along with us.]

2. The comfort of being interested in the Gospel of Christ—

[There were many sins for which the Mosaic dispensation provided no sacrifice: and God himself warned Eli, that "the iniquity of his house should never be purged by sacrifice or offering, to the end of time." But no such declaration is made to us under the Gospel: there is not a word in all the Bible that even hints at the insufficiency of Christ's sacrifice to atone for the greatest guilt, or the doubtfulness of any person's acceptance, provided he plead that sacrifice as the ground of his hopes. We are told indeed, that, "if a man sin wilfully (in rejecting that sacrifice) after he has received the knowledge of the truth, there remains no other sacrifice, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation:" but to those who penitently trust in that sacrifice there is no ground of despondency. Whatever then our sins may have been, let us remember, that the death of Christ was "a propitiation for the sins of the whole world;" that "his blood is able to cleanse us from all sin;" and that "though our sins be red as crimson, they shall through him be made white as snow." Let this comfort us under every desponding apprehension; and whilst, with Eli, we commit the entire disposal of all events into the hands of a righteous God, let us cast ourselves with confidence on his promised mercy, and "hold fast the rejoicing of our hope firm unto the end."]

CCLXXXVI

ELI'S ANXIETY FOR THE ARK OF GOD

1 Sam. 4:13. Lo, Eli sat upon a seat by the wayside watching: for his heart trembled for the ark of God.

THE word of God, to whatever it relate, shall certainly in due time be accomplished: it may indeed, like the seed under the clods, appear to have been lost: but as soon as the appointed season arrives, we shall be made to see, that not a jot or tittle of God's word can ever fail. It had some years before been announced to Eli, that God would bring such judgments upon his house as should make "the ears of every one that heard of them to tingle." Now the time for the execution of the threatening drew nigh; and the manner in which it was executed is set before us. The Philistines had gained a victory over Israel, and had slain about four thousand men. The elders of Israel, astonished at such an event, devised an expedient for securing, as they hoped, a successful issue to the contest. They sent to Shiloh for the ark of God; which accordingly was brought by Hophni and Phinehas into the camp. Eli, at the advanced age of ninety-eight, being informed of the measure that had been adopted, anticipated in his mind the evils that were at hand; and full of anxiety, "sat by the wayside, watching; for his heart trembled for the ark of God."

We propose to consider,

I. The grounds of his anxiety—

Eli did not doubt whether God was able to protect his ark; but he had just grounds to doubt whether he would protect it—

[He knew the wicked state of the people at large, and of his sons in particular——He knew that the measure which had been adopted, had not been commanded or authorized by God——He knew that if the ark should be taken, the loss would be incalculable——He knew that in the event of such a misfortune, the Philistines would profanely exult over the God of Israel——]

And if on these grounds he trembled for the ark, is there not reason to tremble for the cause of God in many parts of the Christian world?

[Of the wickedness of merely nominal Christians it is almost superfluous to speak. Let us turn our attention rather to those whose office it is to bear the ark and to minister before it; how many of them, alas! walk unworthy of their high calling! Or let us look to those who profess to regard the ark of God, and to expect salvation from a Covenant God in Christ: do we not behold amongst them many by whom God is habitually and grievously dishonoured? Are there not many too, who, under a sense of their guilt and danger, devise expedients which were never sanctioned by the Lord, and resort to them for salvation, in an utter neglect of those means which have been revealed by God? What have all such persons reason to expect, but that God, who has long since departed from the Churches of Asia, and from innumerable other Churches which once enjoyed the light of his Gospel, should "remove his candlestick" from them? And what if such a judgment should be inflicted upon us? How would those who hate the light exult, and the daughters of the uncircumcised triumph! Truly, if we viewed the state of the Christian world aright, there is scarcely a people for whom we have not cause to tremble, lest they should lose the privileges which they are so backward to improve, and be delivered up into the hands of their spiritual enemies. And "woe unto them when God departs from them!"]

Commendable as the anxiety of Eli was, we cannot be surprised at,

II. The issue of it—

[The Israelites were defeated: no less than thirty thousand of them perished: the sons of Eli, the priests who bore the ark, were slain: and the ark itself was taken. The awful tidings soon reached the ears of Eli. He heard of Israel's defeat, and bowed with meek submission; as he did also when he was informed of the death of both his sons: but when he was told that the ark of God was taken,

he fainted, he fell, he died.

Now in this death he may appear to have resembled the wicked Israelites: but there was in truth a great difference between them. His death indeed was in part judicial, and so far may be compared with theirs: but theirs was accompanied with manifest tokens of the divine displeasure; and we have reason to fear that not they only, but Hophni and Phinehas also, were cut off in their sins. But Eli shewed his supreme regard for God; and in some sense died a martyr to his love to God. The wife of Phinehas also evinced the same piety. She was so affected with the tidings, that her pangs of travail were prematurely hastened; and, when her attendants strove to comfort her with the information that she had borne a son, she no further noticed it than to give him the name of I-chabod, which means inglorious; assigning as the reason for it, that “the glory was departed from Israel, and the ark of God was taken.” Thus did she, and Eli, manifest, that a concern for the honour of God was deeply rooted in their minds, more deeply than any other consideration, whether of public interest or of the ties of consanguinity.

We congratulate then this aged priest on the issue of his anxiety: and we rejoice, that, when his errors in life had subjected him to the divine displeasure, he shewed in his death that he had obtained mercy of the Lord. Had we not been informed of this closing scene, we might have doubted how far the judgments of God might come upon him in the eternal world: but, with this knowledge of his latter end, we feel no doubt of his acceptance with God, and his exaltation to the realms of bliss.]

This whole history is very instructive: it TEACHES us,

1. The inefficacy of ordinances—

[As the Israelites idolized the ark, and looked to it as a saviour in the place of God, so do many look to the ordinances of religion, (as though there were in them a power to save,) instead of looking through them to the God of ordinances. But, though Paul should plant or Apollos water, it is God alone that can give the increase: and if we put the word, or ministers, or sacraments, or any thing else in the place of God, we shall find them to be a lamp without oil, and “a fountain sealed.”]

2. The danger of presumption—

[The Israelites hoped for the divine protection, though they humbled not themselves for their iniquities, nor even in earnest implored his help; yea, they shouted for joy as though a victory were already gained. But it is in vain to indulge such an hope as this. If we turn not from our sins, it is not possible but that we must be overtaken by the divine judgments. For the truth of this, God himself refers us to the history before us: “Go,” says he, “and learn what I did to Shiloh, for the wickedness thereof.”]

3. The necessity of walking in the fear of God—

[We know not how soon, or how suddenly, death may come upon us. Even if our lives be prolonged to an advanced age, we may yet be taken off without a moment’s warning. How desirable then is it that all, and especially those who are drawing nigh to the time of childbirth, should stand ready for death and judgment! It is not necessary, nor indeed desirable, that we should be living under a servile dread of death; but we should be “working out our salvation with fear and trembling.” We should be “trembling for the ark of God;” longing to hear of the victories of Christ in the world, and dreading to hear of the triumphs of his enemies. We should particularly “watch,” to see the progress of his grace in our own souls, and fear lest by any means he should be dishonoured through us. If that be our frame of mind, we shall be accepted of God both in life and death: for the declaration of God himself is this, “Blessed is the man that feareth always.”]

CCLXXXVII

THE ARK RETURNED TO BETH-SHEMESH

1 Sam. 6:20. And the men of Beth-shemesh said, Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?

TILL we come to behold some extraordinary interposition of the Deity, we have in general a very slight sense of his majesty and greatness: but when we see any remarkable display of his power, we are apt to forget all his other perfections, and to think of him with insupportable terror. We have a striking instance of this in the Israelites, when they saw God’s decision of their controversy with Aaron on the subject of the priesthood: “They said, Behold, we die, we perish, we all perish: whosoever cometh any thing near unto the tabernacle of the Lord shall die: shall we be consumed with dying?” Thus, in the passage before us, the men of Beth-shemesh, who had just before manifested so little respect for the Lord as to treat his ark with impious irreverence, no sooner felt the tokens of his displeasure than they exclaimed, “Who is able to stand before this holy Lord God?”

We propose to consider,

I. The grounds and occasions of this question—

To understand it aright, we must consult the whole of this and of the preceding chapter.

God had prevailed over the idolatrous Philistines—

[God had, for the punishment of his offending people, delivered the ark into the hands of their enemies: and the Philistines having

triumphed, as they imagined, over the God of Israel, placed the ark, as a trophy, in the temple of Dagon their god. They had before "offered a great sacrifice to Dagon, when, as they supposed, he had delivered Samson into their hand:" and now they endeavoured to do him still greater honour, by placing, as they imagined, the God of Israel at his feet. But behold, their God, without any visible cause, fell prostrate before the ark; and, when set up again in his place, again, the very next night, fell down before the ark, having both his head and his hands broken from the trunk. Should they not have learned from this that their idol had neither wisdom nor power to effect any thing?

But when they would not understand from this sign the superiority of the God of Israel, Jehovah smote multitudes of them with a pestilence, of which they died; and multitudes also with emerods (which are supposed to be a very grievous kind of piles); insomuch that they were constrained to acknowledge that "his hand was sore upon them, and upon Dagon their gode." Wearied with their sufferings, they sent the ark to Gath: but there the same judgments were inflicted on the people, both small and great: so that they got it removed to Ekron; where the people were terrified at the prospect of experiencing the like calamities, and soon united in the general wish for its dismissal from their country. Another judgment also which God inflicted on them contributed to make them anxious to restore the ark without delay, and to appease the wrath of him whose symbol it was: their country was suddenly overrun with mice, which destroyed all the fruits of the earth. A consultation therefore was held by all the priests and diviners, to ascertain the best method of testifying their sorrow for the indignities offered to Jehovah: the result of which was, to send back the ark, with representations in gold both of the mice and of the emerods, five in number, one for each of the lords who ruled the country, and who were therefore fit representatives of the whole people.

But in their mode of executing this they shewed how reluctant they were to part with the ark, or to acknowledge Jehovah's power. They put the ark on a cart, and yoked two milch kine to it, and left them to go whither they would; taking care however to shut up their calves at home, that, if they should, contrary to all their natural inclinations, go directly to the way of Beth-shemesh, it might be evident, beyond all possibility of doubt, that they were constrained to do so by the invisible power of Jehovah.

In all this, however, God glorified himself, and shewed that the whole creation was subject unto him, and that He alone was "God over all the earth."]

He had punished also his own presumptuous people—

[The men of Beth-shemesh received the ark, as it became them, with joy and gratitude; and immediately offered the kine a burnt-offering to the Lord. But soon they lost that reverence which they had been ever taught to feel towards that symbol of Jehovah, and with impious curiosity looked into the ark, which was not so much as to be seen by any except the high-priest, and by him only once in the year. For this profane conduct God smote the men of Beth-shemesh, even "fifty thousand and threescore and ten men," or, as it probably should rather be read, "fifty out of a thousand, even threescore and ten men." Terrified at this judgment, especially as connected with all the judgments that had been inflicted on the Philistines, the men of Beth-shemesh were as desirous to get rid of the ark, as ever the Philistines themselves had been. Instead of humbling themselves before him for their sin, they thought only of their punishment; and were willing rather to part with Jehovah himself, than to conciliate his favour by suitable humiliation.]

Such were the grounds of this desponding question. We now proceed to state,

II. The answer to be given to it—

Whatever reason for despondency there was in their apprehension, there was none in reality.

Doubtless the wicked can never stand before God—

[God is a holy Being, that "cannot look upon iniquity" without the utmost abhorrence of it. The profane sinner, however he may "contemn God," and "puff at his judgments," will have far other thoughts of God when once he begins to feel, either in his body or in his mind, the effects of his displeasure. Behold, how changed was the voice of Nebuchadnezzar, when he recovered from the malady which God had inflicted on him! and what a contemptible "god" did Herod appear, when worms were devouring his vitals! Or look at Belshazzar, with his knees smiting together at the sight of the hand-writing on the wall; or at Felix, when Paul "reasoned with him of righteousness, temperance, and the judgment to come:" how little were these persons able to stand before the Majesty of heaven! And shall it be thought, that when they shall be summoned before his tribunal in the last day, they will be able to make good their cause? No: they will wish for rocks and mountains to fall upon them and to "cover them from the wrath of the Lamb." Now they may justify themselves, and condemn the righteous; but in that day, we are assured, "The ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous." Nor will the presumptuous and disobedient professor stand before God: for "not every one that saith unto Christ, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of our Father which is in heaven." Men may plead that they have eaten and drunk in his presence, and done many wonderful works in his name; but the Lord Jesus will say to them, "Depart from me; I never knew you, ye workers of iniquity."

O that every sinner would consider this; and that every professor of religion would search and try his ways!——]

But the true believer has no cause to dread his presence—

[Even the removal of the judgments from the penitent Philistines is sufficient to shew that God delighteth in mercy, and that "judgment is his strange act," to which he is greatly averse. But there are numberless promises made to the believer, promises which may "embolden him to enter into the holiest with the blood of Jesus" in his hand, just as the high-priest, on the day of annual expiation, entered with the blood of his sacrifices within the veil. Though he is in himself a guilty and corrupt creature, in Christ he stands before God without spot or blemish: yea, "though his sins have been red as crimson, they are washed away, and he is made

white as snow." Let him only be steadfast in the faith, and he has nothing to fear. Whilst he shews forth his faith by his works, he may expect to enjoy that "peace of God which passeth all understanding:" and especially, whilst he is filled with love, and therein bears the image of his God, he may look forward to the day of judgment with confidence and joyr——Know then, Believer, that "in Christ you may have boldness and access with confidence unto the lather by the faith of Christ;" and that in due time you shall "be presented faultless before him with exceeding joyt."]

OBSERVE then, from this subject,

1. How great an enemy to our welfare is slavish fear!

[What might not the Philistines and the Beth-shemites have obtained, if, instead of sending the ark from them through slavish terror, they had humbled themselves before it, and sought mercy of the Lord? But so it is with persons who are filled with slavish fear; they wish to banish that which inspires them with terror, rather than to part with their sin, which alone makes God an object of dread. Hence they will resort to any thing for peace, rather than to God himself, who alone can give them peace. But let this be a fixed principle in our minds; that, whatever judgments we either feel or fear, we will not entertain hard thoughts of God. Let us bear in mind, that he is infinitely more willing to give than we are to ask; and that those who "come to him in the name of Jesus he will in no wise cast out."]

2. What a comfort to the soul is the knowledge of Christ!

[The dissolution of the world, and the coming of Christ to judgment, have nothing in them terrific to the true believer. He has a refuge, and an hiding-place; yea "Christ himself is to him a sanctuary," where he is hid from the fear of evil——O that we did but cultivate this knowledge more! Christ is the true ark, which contains that law that was fulfilled by him, and is covered by the mercy-seat, from whence mercy is dispensed to all his believing people. Into that ark we may look; not indeed with unhallowed curiosity, but with an humble desire to understand all the mysteries of redemption. The cherubim that overshadowed the mercy-seat intimate to us, not only what the angels in heaven are doing, (for they are constantly endeavouring to look into this mystery,) but what we also should do. St. Paul, after preaching Christ for twenty years, still pressed forward for a further knowledge of him; and with the same view we also should be "searching the Scriptures which testify of him." This is a knowledge in comparison of which all things else are as dung and dross: and the more we attain of it, the more shall we be transformed into his imagez, and be rendered meet for the glory which he has prepared for us.]

CCLXXXVIII

SAMUEL'S SUCCESSFUL INTERCESSION

1 Sam. 7:8, 9. And the children of Israel said to Samuel, Cease not to cry unto the Lord our God for us, that he will save us out of the hand of the Philistines. And Samuel took a sucking lamb, and offered it for a burnt-offering wholly unto the Lord: and Samuel cried unto the Lord for Israel; and the Lord heard him.

THERE is scarcely a more striking instance of reformation to be found in all the Holy Scriptures, than in the chapter before us. The people of Israel had long been in a state of awful departure from God. They had presumptuously confided in the ark at a former period, as though its very presence was sufficient to secure them the victory over the most powerful enemies: but now, though it had been restored to their country twenty years, no one had shewn any just regard to it. We may well suppose, however, that Samuel had not been idle: indeed we apprehend that the general reformation which took place at this time, was the fruit of his labours. Availing himself of the deep impression which had been made on the minds of the whole nation, he proposed to meet all the elders of Israel at Mizpeh, with a view to keep a fast unto the Lord. This measure was adopted: but the Philistines, imagining that the collecting of so many persons at one place was with a view to combine for military purposes, took the alarm, and determined to make an assault on them, before they should be able to arrange their plans, and prepare themselves for the battle. The approach of the Philistines produced great consternation at Mizpeh, and necessitated the Israelites to stand on their defence. But, conscious of their incapacity to resist their foes, they besought Samuel to intercede with God for them. His intercession is the subject which we propose for our present consideration; and we shall notice it,

I. As solicited by them—

They had now learned by experience that God alone could help them—

[They did not, as formerly, resort to the ark for aid: nor did they confide in an arm of flesh: Jehovah himself was now their hope: and they sought him in a manner that was truly becoming: "they lamented after him," being grieved at their hearts that they had provoked him to depart from them: they "drew water, and poured it out before him," expressing thereby the depth of their sorrow: and "they fasted," in order to beget in themselves a more penitent sense of all their transgressions. In this frame of mind they betook themselves to him, whose power had so often proved effectual for their support.]

But, conscious of their own unworthiness, they sought with all earnestness the intercession of Samuel—

[Very striking is their address to him; "Cease not to pray unto God for us." They were persuaded that "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man would avail much." Hence they entreated Samuel to intercede for them. But they remembered that the intercession of Moses against Amalek was no longer successful than whilst his hands were held up in prayer; and therefore they importuned Samuel not to suspend for a moment his cries to God in their behalf. Happy were they in having such an intercessor; and happy in having an heart to acknowledge his worth, and to seek his aid.]

Let us next attend to the intercession,

II. As offered by him—

He offered to the Lord a burnt-offering—

[Though Samuel was not a priest, he officiated as a priest on this occasion, and was doubtless accepted of God in that service. The presenting of a sucking lamb upon the altar intimated that neither the people nor himself could approach unto God, or hope for any mercy at his hands, but through that great Sacrifice which should one day be offered, even that Lamb of God which should take away the sins of the whole world. At the same time, as a burnt-offering, it was intended to honour God, who had so often succoured them in the hour of need. This affords an important hint to us in all our addresses at the throne of grace: we must implore mercy solely through the sacrifice of Christ, and acknowledge God's perfections as glorified, in all his dispensations, whether of mercy or of judgment, of providence or of grace——]

This sacrifice he accompanied with fervent prayer—

[Samuel well knew, that as prayer without a sacrifice would be of no avail, so neither would a sacrifice without prayer. He therefore "cried unto the Lord." O what is intimated in that expression! what humility, what fervour, what importunity! Such is the prayer that God requires; and such prayer, offered in dependence on our great Sacrifice, shall never go forth in vain.]

The efficacy of his intercession will be seen, if we notice it,

III. As accepted of the Lord—

Instantly did God vouchsafe to answer it—

[Before the offering of the lamb was finished, God's acceptance of the prayer was manifest. The Philistines approached to the battle; but were so intimidated and confounded by thunder and lightning, that they fell an easy prey to those whom they had expected utterly to destroy. Thus the intervention of God was seen in the clearest light. Had the victory been gained solely by the sword of Israel, they might have ascribed it to their own skill and prowess: but when it arose from causes that were entirely out of the reach of men, they could not but acknowledge that God himself had interposed in answer to the prayer of Samuel. Signal as this favour was, we are warranted to expect a similar acceptance of our prayers, if only we ask in humility and faith. Jehoshaphat obtained a similar answer under circumstances precisely similar: and with equal speed was Daniel answered, when praying for himself: and we also shall be heard in like manner, if we draw nigh to God, as it is both our privilege and our duty to do.]

He answered too to the utmost extent of the petitions offered—

[Deliverance out of the hands of the Philistines was the mercy asked; and so entirely was this deliverance effected, that the Philistines never came again into the land of Israel as long as Samuel lived.

We too may expect that God will exceed our utmost requests. If we are straitened at all, it is not in him, but in ourselves. If we were more earnest, and more enlarged in prayer, our blessings would be proportionably multiplied.]

We may LEARN from hence,

1. On what our safety as a nation rests—

[We should imitate their repentance—reformation—faith—and zeal—and should unite, both ministers and people, in committing our cause to God——]

2. How our safety as individuals is to be secured—

[There is no other way for individuals than for nations: only in nations the mercies of God may be enjoyed by those who have been at no pains to seek them; whereas every individual must stand or fall according to his own exertions in the ways of penitence and faith.]

CCLXXXIX

MEMORIALS OF GOD'S GOODNESS

1 Sam. 7:12. Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Eben-ezer, saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.

THERE is in the generality of men a very culpable inattention to the ways of Providence. A variety of dispensations succeed each other without ever attracting their notice. Hence they are unconscious of any kindness exercised towards them; and are ready to

ascribe their success to themselves, or even to chance, rather than to God. But, if they would observe the many strange and unforeseen events which arise, and notice how they concur to promote their welfare, they would “understand the loving-kindness of the Lord,” and be constrained to acknowledge his wise and gracious agency.

The veil with which modern occurrences are covered, is, in the Scriptures, removed; and we see “the holy arm of the Lord made bare.” We at this day should regard a storm as a mere accidental thing, common perhaps at the time of year; and think little of God, “who maketh the clouds his chariots, and his ministers a flame of fire.” But, in the passage before us, the victory gained by means of a storm is ascribed to the merciful interposition of Jehovah. By means of thunder which terrified the Philistine army, the unprepared Israelites were enabled to destroy them, and to break the power of those who for twenty years had grievously oppressed them: nor was it a little remarkable, that this victory was gained upon the very spot where, twenty years before, God had delivered both them and the ark in which they vainly trusted, into the hands of the Philistines. To commemorate the goodness of the Lord, “Samuel set up a stone, which he called Eben-ezer, saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.”

From these words we shall take occasion to shew,

I. What reason we have to erect similar memorials—

Whether the agency of God be more or less visible, it is certain that not so much as a sparrow falls to the ground without his special direction. Let us then take a view of the mercies he has vouchsafed to us. These have been,

1. Public—

[These have been exceeding great——and they demand our devoutest acknowledgments.]

2. Private—

[We shall find abundant cause of thankfulness, if we survey our temporal mercies. How are we indebted to God for life, when multitudes have been taken into the eternal world; and for health, when many have been pining away with sickness; or racked with acute disorders! What an unspeakable mercy is it that our reason is continued to us, when many are bereft of this noble faculty, and thereby reduced, like Nebuchadnezzar, to a level with the beasts! What do we owe to God, if we have found comfort in our relatives and connexions, (for “it is God that maketh men to be of one mind in a house,”) and if death has not been permitted to rob us of those, in whose welfare we are deeply interested! Perhaps during the preceding year we have entered into new connexions, or had our families enlarged. Perhaps our business has prospered; or the difficulties with which we have contended, have been overcome. In all these things we ought to acknowledge the hand of God, and to think how highly favoured we have been above myriads of our fellow-creatures.

But if we turn our thoughts to the contemplation of our spiritual mercies, what ground shall we find for the liveliest gratitude, and the profoundest adoration! That the ordinances of the Gospel are continued to us, when, for our misimprovement of them “our candlestick might so justly have been removed;” what a blessing is this! If we only consider that the preached Gospel is, though not the only, yet the principal mean which God makes use of for the salvation of men, we never can be sufficiently thankful that its sound has reached our ears, and its light been exhibited before our eyes; “for many prophets and kings have in vain desired to see and hear these things;” which we so richly enjoy.

We have all, more or less, been made the subjects of restraining grace: and O, what a tribute of praise does that demand! How many of our fellow-creatures have brought themselves to an untimely end, either by their excesses, or by the hands of the public executioner! How many unhappy females protract a miserable existence by the wages of prostitution! How many, either to conceal their shame, or to avenge a quarrel, have committed murder! How many, to rid themselves of their present troubles, have madly rushed on suicide! Whence is it, I would ask, that we have not fallen into one or other of these evils? Are we made of better materials than they? “Have we not all one father?” Did they, previous to the commission of their evil deeds, imagine themselves more likely to fall than we? Let us acknowledge “the good hand of God upon us;” it is God who alone has made us to differ: and if he had not preserved us by his restraining grace, we should at this moment have been numbered with the most miserable and abandoned of the human race.

Some amongst us, we trust, have been made to experience converting grace. And what cause for thankfulness have they! Look around, and see how few even of those who stately hear the Gospel are savingly converted by it! What then do they owe to God, who have been quickened from the dead; who have had their sins blotted out by the blood of Jesus; who have been made partakers of a divine nature, and heirs of the kingdom of heaven! Should not they raise an Eben-ezer to the Lord?

Nor have they less cause for thankfulness who have received establishing grace. Consider how many have “begun to run well, and afterwards been hindered:” some waxing cold in their regard to religion; others “turning aside to vain jangling;” some drawn into infidelity; and others making religion itself hateful and abominable, by their hypocrisy or open impiety. Never does a year pass, but some instances of grievous backsliding occur, to the great dishonour of God, and the grief of all his people. And why are not we the persons that have been left to fall? Have we felt no secret inclination to sin? Have we on no occasion yielded to the suggestions of our great adversary, so that nothing but Omnipotence, snatching us like brands out of the burning, could have preserved us? Have we never inwardly backslidden, so that if God had not for his own mercy’s sake restored us, we must have departed for ever? Let us only examine the records of our own hearts, and call our own ways to remembrance; and there is not one of us who will not be ready to look upon himself as the greatest monument of mercy that can be found on earth.

Whether then we consider our temporal or our spiritual mercies, we cannot but find unbounded occasion to raise grateful memorials to the Lord our God.]

But it will be proper to shew,

II. In what manner we should do it—

External and visible monuments are very proper expressions of national gratitude: but, as individuals, we must erect very different memorials;—

1. We must get a sense of God's goodness engraven on our hearts—

[We need not to form inscriptions on stone or brass: we are concerned rather to have the mercies of our God written upon our hearts. But here is our great fault: we do not "keep his great goodness in remembrance:" we "forget him at the sea, even at the Red Sea." One single calamity will call forth complaints in abundance: but ten thousand mercies are scarcely sufficient to raise the soul to God, or to excite one desire to requite his love. Sensible of this, David stirred up his soul to the performance of its duty: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and let all that is within me bless his holy name: bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits." It is in this way that we must raise memorials to God: and such memorials he will not despise. One grateful and devout acknowledgment is a more pleasing sacrifice to him than the cattle upon a thousand hills: "Whoso offereth him praise, glorifieth him."]

2. We must endeavour to impress others also with a sense of it—

[This is a method of perpetuating the remembrance of his goodness, which the Lord himself has prescribed. And the more sensible we ourselves are of his kindness to us, the more shall we exert ourselves to preserve the knowledge of it in this way. How admirable is the example of David in this particular! He seems to have laboured with all his might, not merely to praise God with his own lips, but to interest all, whether of his own or future generations, in the same blessed employment. On the contrary, how severely was Hezekiah rebuked for ostentatiously displaying his own riches, when he should have been magnifying to the Babylonish ambassadors the Lord's goodness, and commending to them the knowledge of the God of Israel! It is possible enough that he might pretend to give God the glory; but God, who knew his heart, saw that he was lifted up with pride: so we are in danger of erecting memorials rather for our own honour, than for God's: but we must be exceeding jealous upon this head, lest, instead of pleasing, we offend the Majesty of heaven; and lest, instead of bringing a blessing upon ourselves, we entail a curse. We may boast; but our boast must be of God, and not of ourselves: we may raise monuments; but they must be truly "Eben-ezers," ascribing every thing to "the Lord's help," and not to an arm of flesh.]

3. We must testify our sense of it by an increased devotion to his service—

[If we are sincere in our acknowledgments, we shall be inquiring, "What shall I render to the Lord, for all the benefits that he hath done unto me?" The end for which our God vouchsafes his mercies to us, is, that we may bring forth fruit to his glory: and, if he find that all his pains and culture are without effect, he will cut us down as "cumberers of the ground." Whatever be our character then, we must make this improvement of the Lord's goodness to us: if we are impenitent, it must lead us to repentance; if we are already his servants, it must constrain us to increased diligence in his service, and cause us to abound more and more in every good word and work. We must not satisfy ourselves with empty commendations, crying, "Lord, Lord;" but must do with cheerfulness and delight whatsoever he commands us.]

4. We must trust him in all future difficulties and dangers—

[This is a very principal end of raising memorials of any kind: it is, not merely to remind us of what God has done, but of what he is ever ready to do, if we call upon him. Here again we are called to admire the conduct of David, who regarded the deliverances which he had experienced from the paws of the lion, and of the bear, as arguments for trusting in God, and for expecting a similar deliverance from the sword of Goliath. St. Paul also made a similar improvement of the mercies vouchsafed to him; saying, "God hath delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver; in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us." Trials will succeed each other, as "clouds coming after rain:" we are not to expect a termination of them, till we are called to our rest above. Yet while on this account we can only say, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us," we may safely commit ourselves into his hands, knowing, that "whoso trusteth in the Lord, shall be even as Mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but standeth fast for ever."]

CCXC

THE DUTY OF COMMEMORATING GOD'S MERCIES

1 Sam. 7:12. Then Samuel took a stone, and set it between Mizpeh and Shen, and called the name of it Eben-ezer, saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.

The Jews lived under a Theocracy, and received from God a greater number of visible interpositions in their favour than any other nation under heaven. In remembrance of these, many different memorials were erected, and many rites instituted; that so the people

might be kept in a steadfast adherence to him as their rightful Sovereign, and in a constant dependence on him as their almighty Protector. But they were ever prone to depart from him, and to transfer their allegiance to the gods of the heathen that were no gods, but idols of wood and stone. For these iniquities that were frequently given up into the hands of their enemies, and left to feel the bitter consequences of their impiety. But, when they were made sensible of their guilt, and brought to humble themselves before God, he returned in mercy to them, and effected for them the deliverance they implored. Such an interposition was obtained for them by the prayers of Samuel; and in remembrance of it was the stone erected, to which my text refers.

But, as God is the Governor of all the earth, and interposes still for his people as really, though not so visibly, as in the days of old, we will not confine our views of this transaction to the particular deliverance to which it primarily refers, but will extend them generally to the Church at large; and consider it as,

I. A commemorative act—

The Jews at this time were grievously oppressed by the Philistines. Samuel called them to repentance, and promised, that, if they would put away their false gods, and return with penitential sorrow to the Lord their God, they should be delivered out of the hands of their enemies. That their return to Jehovah might be the more solemn and universal, Samuel appointed all the heads of the nation to meet him at Mizpeh. But the Philistines, jealous of so large an assemblage of Israelites on the borders of their country, came forth to attack them: and God, in answer to the prayers of Samuel, rescued his people from their hands, and utterly discomfited the Philistine armies. To commemorate this deliverance, Samuel “put up the stone, which he called Eben-ezer, saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us.” But, to understand the precise scope of this memorial, we must advert to the means by which the deliverance was obtained. Then we shall see that the stone thus raised, proclaimed, to the whole nation,

1. That God is a hearer of prayer—

[This the people could not but acknowledge, since they all had applied to Samuel to entreat the Lord in their behalf. And this was a truth which it was of the utmost importance to commemorate, since it demonstrated Jehovah to be the only true God. To this truth the whole Scriptures bear witness. It was in answer to the cries of Israel that God had formerly delivered them from Egypt, and brought them in safety through the Red Sea. When Amalek came forth against them to destroy them in the wilderness, it was not by the sword of Joshua, but by the prayers of Moses, that Israel obtained the victory: for, when the hands of Moses hanged down, Amalek prevailed; but, in consequence of their being held up until the evening, Israel prevailed, and gained at last a complete triumph. In every part of their history the same truth was manifested—And to this hour are the memorials of it the greatest possible encouragements to seek for mercy at his hands.]

2. That he will deliver his penitent and believing people—

[Here we must have an especial eye to the occasion before us. The people, in compliance with the exhortations of Samuel, prayed, and fasted, and confessed their sins, and put away their strange gods, and gave themselves up to Jehovah, “to serve him only.” This shewed the sincerity of their repentance, without which they could not hope for mercy at God’s hands.

But, as humiliation alone could be of no avail, Samuel offered a sucking lamb as a burnt-offering to God, thereby acknowledging the people’s desert to be utterly consumed, and their hope of acceptance only through a vicarious sacrifice. And it is remarkable, that, as Samuel was in the very act of offering this sacrifice, “God thundered with a great thunder upon the Philistines,” and, by the terror which those thunders inspired, caused them to fall an easy prey to the sword of Israel.

Thus the people were reminded, that in all their approaches to the throne of grace there must be an union of penitence and faith: and that, whenever they so approached God, they should assuredly be delivered, however great might be the difficulties in which they were involved, or imminent the dangers to which they were exposed.]

But to all future ages also was this memorial intended to convey,

II. An instructive lesson—

It plainly teaches us,

1. That we should often review our past mercies—

[All have received mercies in abundance, which they ought from time to time to review, in order to impress a sense of them the more deeply on their minds. For want of this, how many mercies are forgotten! and what a loss do we sustain by means of our forgetfulness! Blessings that are unnoticed are no more to us than they are to the brute creation: but if we bring them frequently to our remembrance, we have frequently in the retrospect a sweeter taste of them than we had in the actual possession. From this act of Samuel’s then let us learn to pass over no mercy without labouring to imprint it on our minds, and to retain the remembrance of it to our dying hour.]

2. That we should especially view the hand of God in them—

[It is this which gives the chief zest to all our mercies. And to whom can we trace them but to God? Look at your temporal mercies; the time, and place of your birth, when the light of the Gospel was shining all around you—your preservation during the helpless state of infancy, which so many myriads of human beings never survive—the many deliverances, seen, and unseen, which you have experienced since—the blessings of health and abundance, whilst so many have spent their days in sickness and want. View

but the last year, and see how many have been plunged into deep distress, from which you are exempt; or been called away into the eternal world, whilst you are left with protracted opportunities of working out your salvation——Think of your spiritual mercies. Have you any measure of light in your minds, of softness in your hearts, of holiness in your lives? Have you any hopes in Christ as your Saviour; any experience of the Spirit as your Comforter; any prospects of heaven, as your inheritance? Think of multitudes around you, or look at those who are gone beyond redemption, and say, whether it is within the power of language to express your obligations to your God. For who is it that has made you to differ? Will you, or can you, trace these blessings to your own superior wisdom, or goodness, or strength? Must you not of necessity acknowledge the hand of God in them, and say, “Hitherto hath the Lord helped us?” Surely in reference to every blessing, whether temporal or spiritual, you must say with David, “Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name be the praise.”]

3. That we should make our experience of past mercies the ground of expecting all that we can need from God in future— [Doubtless the memorial raised by Samuel was particularly intended to answer this end. And so should the memorials that are raised in our hearts: “Thou hast been my help; therefore under the shadow of thy wings will I rejoice:” “Because the Lord hath inclined his ear unto me, therefore will I call upon him as long as I live.” This was St. Paul’s mode of improving past mercies: “God,” says he, “delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver; in whom we trust that he will yet deliver usg.” From what we have received “hitherto,” we know what to expect henceforth. O blessed effect of preserving memorials of past mercies in our minds! What holy confidence will it introduce into the soul, and what a happy anticipation even of eternal blessedness! Only let the “Eben-ezer” which Samuel erected teach us this, and we shall ourselves raise in due time a similar memorial in the realms of bliss.]

APPLICATION—

1. Take now a review of all that God has done for you in times past— [Let those who are yet living as without God in the world contemplate God’s forbearance towards them——Let those who have been brought out of darkness into the marvellous light of the Gospel survey the riches of divine grace displayed towards them—— Let believers bring to their remembrance their manifold temptations, their grievous back-slidings, their repeated falls; or, if they have been kept from falling, the almost miraculous succours by which they have been upheld——Then will the example before us have its due effect; and God will receive the glory due unto his name.]

2. Look forward now to all that you can need from God in times to come— [Nothing but a sense of our necessities will keep us properly dependent on God. Let your minds then be continually intent on this subject. Think of all you need for body——or for soul——for time——or for eternity——And then see what need you have for help from God in future. Yet be not disheartened by the sight of all your necessities; but remember, that however great they be, “God is able to supply all your need out of his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” Call to mind the promises of help which God has given you in his word; see how ample they are; how repeated; how strong! Though thou art but “a worm,” yet through him “thou shalt thresh the mountains.” In a full persuasion of this, commit your every concern to him, and expect that he will be “a very present help to you in every time of need.” Only trust in him with your whole hearts, and “you shall not be ashamed or confounded world without end.”]

CCXCI

SAMUEL’S JUDICIAL CHARACTER

1 Sam. 7:15–17. And Samuel judged Israel all the days of his life. And he went from year to year in circuit to Bethel, and Gilgal, and Mizpeh, and judged Israel in all those places. And his return was to Ramah; for there was his house; and there he judged Israel; and there he built an altar unto the Lord.

AS there are times and seasons commended to our special attention on a religious account, so there are particular occasions which it is proper for us to notice, on account of the interest they create in the public mind, and the facility they afford for imparting instruction suited to them. The pomp with which the judges of the land are surrounded, when they go their circuits for the purpose of dispensing justice through the land, is calculated to make a good impression upon the community at large; and to fill all ranks of men with gratitude to God, for the protection which they enjoy, under the dominion of laws wisely enacted and well administered. We avail ourselves of the opportunity now offered, to set before you the judicial character of Samuel, (than whom there never existed a more diligent or impartial judge,) with a view to trace a parallel between the privileges enjoyed by Israel under his government, and those with which we are favoured in this happy land.

In the prosecution of this subject I will state,

I. The advantages of Israel under the government of Samuel— Perhaps, amongst all the governors of Israel, there was not one that maintained a more blameless character than Samuel. Indeed,

he is distinguished in Scripture as inferior to none, not excepting even Moses himself: and in our text, we see how eminent he was,

1. In the administration of justice—

[Though he had all the cares of government upon his hands, yet did he, from year to year, make a circuit to Bethel, and Gilgal, and Mizpeh, in order to take cognizance of the violations of the law, and to decide with equity all the cases that should be brought before him. Now, this was a very great benefit, not to those particular places only, but to all the country round about them: for it tended to uphold the authority of the laws: it gave to all an assurance that their grievances should be redressed, and that those who dared to violate the law should not go unpunished. Thus it conduced to the peace and welfare of society in general, inasmuch as it checked the commission of outrage amongst the lawless, and gave security to those who were quiet in the land. His knowledge of the laws inspired all with confidence: his known integrity disposed all to a ready acquiescence in his decisions: his authority silenced opposition, where unreasonable selfishness would otherwise have maintained and perpetuated discord: and his taking a circuit, annually, for the express purpose of dispensing justice, facilitated the access of all to his tribunal; when, if he had remained at home, multitudes would have been constrained to go without redress, through an incapacity to bring before him all the witnesses that should be necessary to substantiate their claims.]

2. In the maintenance of true religion—

[Whilst the ark was at Shiloh, he would probably have not felt himself authorized to build an altar at Ramah: but now that it had been many years removed from the Tabernacle, in which, till it was taken by the Philistines, it had been kept—and, consequently, the worship of Jehovah, as appointed in the Law, had been neglected—he, as a prophet of the Most High God, and doubtless by inspiration of God, raised an altar at Ramah, where the seat of government was; and thus proclaimed through the land, that Jehovah, and Jehovah alone, was to be worshipped. To see this in a proper light, we must recollect, that the whole people of Israel had been addicted to idolatry, worshipping everywhere strange gods, even Baalim and Ashteroth. For this, God had given them up into the hands of the Philistines for several years; till, upon their repenting and turning to the Lord, he had delivered them by the hands of Samuel. It was under these circumstances that Samuel built an altar to the Lord, that so the people might be kept steadfast to the faith they had received. And this was doubtless a great benefit conferred upon the land; because his example, supported and enforced as it was by his authority, could not fail to deter many from relapsing to idolatry, and to encourage everywhere the worship and the service of the one true God.]

Perceiving, as we now must, how happy that people was under such a governor, we yet are only the better prepared to see,

II. The superior advantages which we enjoy under our government—

We will mark this in both of the preceding particulars: for it is certain that we far, very far, excel them,

1. In our legal proceedings—

[We have an order of persons expressly for the purpose of maintaining, and enforcing, and executing the laws. For this office they are qualified, by a long and most laborious education; and are chosen from amongst their competitors on account of their superior proficiency: and, so far from having their time occupied with political engagements, they are absolutely prohibited from entering upon the great political arena of the nation, in order that they may be kept free from any undue bias, and be enabled to devote all their time and all their talents to the prosecution of their one object of dispensing justice through the land. And these persons take a circuit, not through one district only, (like Samuel, who went not beyond the country belonging to the tribe of Benjamin,) but through the whole kingdom; and that, not once only, but twice in the year, and in some part even thrice: and in respect of impartiality and integrity, they were not exceeded even by Samuel himself. Under the whole heavens there never was a country where the laws were more equitably, more impartially dispensed. Even religion itself, which, as an object of aversion, is more likely to warp the judgment than any thing else, is sure to find support according to the laws; and, if it is on any occasion oppressed, it is only in conformity with laws that have been unadvisedly enacted, and not in opposition to laws that have been made for its support.

And who amongst us has not reason to bless God for such a constitution as this? Who is there that can injure the very meanest amongst us, without being amenable to the laws, and paying the penalty due to his transgression? The peace and security which we of this happy land enjoy, under the dominion of the laws, are not exceeded by any people under heaven, and are equalled by very few. And this benefit depends not on the life of any individual: (the Israelites found a far different state of things under the government of Saul:) it is the constitution of the land: it is transmitted and perpetuated under every reign: and I trust it will continue the happy portion of this country to the latest generations!]

2. In our religious privileges—

[We have not one altar raised, in one favoured place; but many, throughout the whole land; so that, for the most part, they are accessible to all: and where the increase of population has required more, they have been erected, with great liberality, at the public expense. Nor is our worship so unedifying or expensive as that at Ramah. No, truly; we have a Liturgy provided for us; a Liturgy, in which all that was shadowed forth under the Jewish ceremonies is plainly declared. The imposition of hands on a dying victim, the sprinkling of his blood upon the mercy-seat and on the offerer, and the consuming of his flesh upon the altar, were but faint emblems of what we are taught in express terms. We go as sinners unto God: we bring before him that great Sacrifice, the Lord Jesus Christ: we implore mercy in the name of that adorable Saviour; and declare our affiance in his all-atoning blood, which we sprinkle on our

consciences for the remission of our sins. The king upon the throne, and the meanest subject in the land, here meet upon a footing of equality; all having equal access to God, and equal encouragement to expect mercy at his hands. Say, ye who are here assembled, whether ye do not feel your elevation in these respects, and congratulate yourselves that the golden sceptre of mercy is held forth equally to all; and that, instead of having occasion to envy the great and mighty of the earth, you have reason rather to rejoice that “there is no respect of persons with God,” or that, if there be, it is in your favour; since God has “chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith, and heirs of his kingdom?” Truly the preaching of the Gospel, unrestrained as it is to time, or place, or party, calls for the devoutest gratitude from every person in the land.]

LEARN ye then, Brethren,

1. How to appreciate the blessings ye enjoy—

[We have seen how happy Israel was under the government of Samuel; and what still richer privileges we of this nation enjoy. But we are surprisingly slow to acknowledge the blessings which are thus richly bestowed upon us. Indeed, the commonness of these mercies is the very thing which hides them from our view. Could we but see what has been done by the Court of Inquisition in Popish countries, and what is still done wherever that tribunal exists; could we see our own friends and relatives seized for some supposed crime, we know not what; and carried, we know not whither; and tried, by we know not whom; and put to death by torments more cruel and lingering than we can conceive; verily we should bless our God for our courts of law, for our trials by jury, for the publicity of all judicial acts, and for the high unimpeachable integrity of our judges. And if we could conceive the cruelties exercised on thousands on account of articles of faith, we should indeed adore our God for the liberty we enjoy, of worshipping God in conformity with our own judgment, and of serving him according to the dictates of our own conscience. Religion, with us, is a part of the national law; and is upheld as sacred, against the efforts of all who would subvert it. Verily, I must say, if we praise not God for these benefits, “the very stones may well cry out against us.”]

2. How to improve the influence we possess—

[Samuel improved his influence for the honour of God, and for the benefit of man. And thus must we also act, according to our ability. True, we are not invested with such authority as his: yet have all of us, in our respective spheres, some opportunity of doing good. We may, both by our example and advice, promote the dominion of law and equity, by doing unto others as we, in a change of circumstances, would think it right that they should do unto us: yes, and on many occasions we may strengthen the hands of those who administer the laws, by giving them the aid of our testimony, and upholding them in the execution of their high office. In so doing, we may be public benefactors to the state. Yet we must not let our zeal be exercised only on things relating to the outward benefit of man: we must have a zeal for God also, and must endeavour to uphold his worship in the land: yes, and in this we must be particularly active in the place where we live. There are many who will take extensive circuits about some temporal matter, who yet are found very remiss at home in matters relating to their God. But in us should be combined a zeal, both public and personal, both civil and religious. Look well then, I pray you, Brethren, to this duty. Let there be in you a holy consistency: and let it be seen, that, if you are benevolent abroad, you are religious at home: and that the more closely your conduct is inspected, the brighter will it be found, and the more will your character be exalted in the estimation both of God and man.]

CCXCII

CONVERSION A GROUND OF JOY

1 Sam. 10:12. Therefore it became a proverb, Is Saul also among the prophets?

PROVERBS are short and weighty sentences, comprising in few words some great and important truth. Of this kind was that which David addressed to Saul: “Mine hand shall not be upon thee: as saith the proverb of the ancients, Wickedness proceedeth from the wicked.” Of this kind were all the Proverbs of Solomon. But sometimes they are brief sayings referring to some particular event, which they serve at once both to commemorate and improve. The most remarkable of any in the Bible, is that which was used to commemorate God’s interposition in behalf of Isaac, to preserve him from being offered up in sacrifice by his father’s hand, and at the same time to shew what interpositions all God’s faithful and obedient people may expect in the very moment of their greatest necessity: “In the mount of the Lord it shall be seen;” or, as it should rather be translated, “In the mount (the mount of difficulty) the Lord shall be seen.” The proverb in our text is of a less serious kind: yet it is very instructive, as shewing, that God will impart his blessings to whomsoever he will, and not unfrequently to those who we should, humanly speaking, say, were least likely to receive them.

Upon the people of Israel desiring to have a king over them, God appointed Saul to be their king. But, when Samuel announced to Saul the purpose of God respecting him, Saul could not believe it. Samuel, however, gave him signs, whereby he should infallibly know the truth of what had been declared. The first was, that he should find two men by Rachel’s sepulchre, who should announce to him, that his father had found the asses, for the loss of which he had been grieved; and that he was now sorrowing for him, whom

he had sent to search for them. The next was, that in the Plain of Tabor he should meet three men going up to Bethel with three kids, and three loaves of bread, and a bottle of wine, to offer to the Lord; and that two of the loaves they should give to him. The third was, that, on his arriving at the hill of God, where was (or rather had been) a garrison of the Philistines, a company of prophets should come down with different instruments of music, and should prophesy; and that "the Spirit of the Lord should come down on him, and he should prophesy with them, and be turned into another man." All these predictions came to pass accordingly; and all the people, when they saw Saul prophesying, as skilfully as any of the other prophets, were filled with wonder, that he, who had never been instructed, should be able to perform his part in so extraordinary a way. They could scarcely believe their own senses. And so remarkable was it in their eyes, that it served them as a proverb, whereby to express to all future generations any great and unlooked-for improvement in the mind of man: "Is Saul also among the prophets?"

Now this proverb we may consider as containing,

I. A subject for grateful admiration—

What surprise this change in Saul occasioned amongst all who beheld it, we are informed in the verse before our text: "It came to pass, when all that knew him beforetime saw, that, behold, he prophesied among the prophets, then the people said one to another, What is this that is come unto the son of Kish? Is Saul among the prophets?" A similar surprise, too, is often created by the change wrought in persons at this day by the grace of God; being wrought under circumstances which, to the eye of sense, appear most unfavourable. Many are converted to God, when no such change could have been hoped for,

1. From their age—

[Some are awakened after they have attained the middle period of life, when it might have been supposed, that their sentiments and habits were so firmly fixed as not to admit of any material alteration. Respecting such, we may suppose their friends to say, 'I am surprised at him, a man of sense and judgment! a man of correct habits and sound principles! How can it be, that he should suffer himself to be warped by the statements of any foolish enthusiast? I can scarcely believe it: Is HE become one of these deluded people?'—Amongst the godly, too, the same surprise may prompt them to ask, 'And is he become one of us?'

Others are turned to God at a very early age, before they could well be expected to exercise any just discretion on matters of such moment. Of them we may suppose the observation to be, What! at his early age has he begun to think? At a time of life when we might expect nothing but thoughtless levity to occupy his mind, has HE begun to set God before him, and to devote himself to his Saviour with his whole heart? Who could have conceived that he should so appreciate the value of his soul, and feel so deeply the importance of eternity? It seems as if another Samuel or Timothy were born into the world, if not a very John, who was sanctified from the womb——]

2. From their occupations—

[At the very first establishment of Christianity, soldiers flocked to ask counsel of John the Baptist, and Roman centurions believed in Christ. Amongst the very Apostles of our Lord, too, was Matthew, a publican, called by Christ, when sitting at the receipt of custom. So now, from amidst camps, where, for the most part, a dissoluteness of manners, rather than any thing of serious piety, may be supposed to dwell, does the work of conversion go forward; and amidst the busiest scenes of worldly merchandize is the still small voice of redeeming love attended to, and made effectual for the salvation of men. And what may we suppose their companions in arms or arts to say? 'I am amazed at him! He, so bold and intrepid as to brave death in its most terrific forms, is he brought down to such a state of feminine weakness, as to be weeping for his sins, and reading his Bible, and praying to God, and performing, I know not how many self-denying services, which he calls his duty? And this other person, too, who was advancing so rapidly towards opulence, is he all on a sudden sitting loose to wealth, and attending to the concerns of his soul?'

And whilst their former friends express their surprise thus, in a way of regret, we may well imagine that those to whom they have joined themselves are not a whit less ready to express the same, in a way of grateful admiration——]

3. From their habits—

[One has lived a self-sufficient sceptic, in haughty unbelief, despising, as weak and credulous, all who yield to the authority of God's blessed word——Another has, with the same proud spirit, valued himself on his attachment to that word, and his conformity to all its dictates; and, from a conceit of his own superior piety, has despised others, and disdained to humble himself, even in the presence of Almighty God——In another has been found nothing but thoughtless gaiety, and a round of habitual dissipation. He has done nothing that violates decorum; he has conformed to the standard which the society in which he lives has established; and he has seen no great end of life, but to consult his own happiness, and to contribute his quota to the happiness of those around him——Another has felt himself more at liberty, and has launched forth into a more licentious course, gratifying his every inclination, without any other restraint than that which worldly prudence has imposed——]

Now, diverse as these habits are, they all present peculiar obstacles to the conversion of the soul. Pride of intellect, self-righteous conceit, love of the world, addictedness to sensual pleasure, all obstruct our way to heaven; and it is a miracle of mercy whenever any of them are overcome. Habit, of whatever kind it be, becomes a second nature; and nothing but Omnipotence can effectually counteract it. When, therefore, this is overcome, and an opposite habit is established in its stead, it gives a just occasion for every observer to remark, "Is Saul also among the prophets?"]

4. From their connexions—

[It not unfrequently happens, that one in a family, surrounded by friends who are altogether adverse to religion, is brought to the knowledge of Christ, whilst all the others are left in darkness; and is enabled to confess Christ, whilst all the others, in a way of solicitation or of menace, put forth their utmost efforts to prevent it. Amidst hatred, contempt, persecution, perhaps the weakest member of the family is enabled to maintain his ground, and to be faithful to his conscience and his God. In the circle in which he moved, it seemed almost impossible that divine grace should reach him: the darkness seemed almost impervious to light, or, at all events, the chains that bound him, incapable of being loosed. But as God, in the case of Peter, caused light to shine into the prison, and the fetters to be loosed, and the prisoner to come forth, so that the very people of God themselves, when they heard his voice, could not credit it; so have we seen, in divers places, the power of God put forth, and “from Caesar’s household, yea, and from the very stones, as it were, children raised up to Abraham.” These events, whensoever they occur, cannot but excite, in all the family of Christ, a grateful admiration, and a devout thanksgiving to Almighty God.]

But we may see in this proverb also,

II. A matter for prudential inquiry—

When we behold how delusive these appearances were in the instance of Saul; and that afterwards, when he was in the very act of seeking to destroy David, he prophesied again, and excited in the beholders the same wonder as before; we cannot but feel extremely jealous of such conversions; and, together with our grateful admiration, blend also a measure of prudential inquiry, saying, “Is Saul among the prophets?”

This is a matter which ought not to be too hastily assumed—

[It is a fact, that many “have a name to live, whilst they are really dead;” and “say they are Jews, whilst they are not, but do lieg.” “Many will say unto Christ, Lord, Lord! when they will not do his will;” and “name the name of Christ, when they will not depart from iniquity.” In the days of old, many would call themselves the children of Abraham, when they would not do the works of Abraham: so now at this day, many will “profess that they know God, whilst they” palpably and habitually “in works deny him.” So far do many carry their self-deception, that they both live and die in the full confidence of their acceptance with God, when yet they have never truly known him; and they will even go to the bar of judgment, as it were, with their arrogant claims in their mouths, “Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name, and in thy name cast out devils, and in thy name done many wonderful works?” But to their utter consternation will the Judge address them, “Depart from me: I never knew you, ye workers of iniquity.”]

How, then, shall the point be determined?

[I answer, if you would know whether you are indeed among the prophets, inquire diligently, whether you have the mind of the prophets; and whether you have the spirit of the prophets. If we do not accord with the Prophets and Apostles in their views of Christ, the matter is clear; we can have no part with them. Moses and all the prophets testified of Him, as the only Saviour of the world: and, if we do not regard him in this light, renouncing all our own righteousness, and looking for acceptance through Him alone, we stand at once self-convicted, and self-condemned.

But we must go further, and examine whether we be renewed, not merely in sentiment, but also “in the spirit of our mind.” We must not merely have a new creed, but really be made new creatures, having all our dispositions and desires conformed to those of Christ himself; being “holy as he is holy,” and “pure as he is pure.” If we would not deceive our own souls, we should take the faith of Abraham, the meekness of Moses, the devotion of David, the firmness of Elijah, the integrity of Daniel, and all the characteristic virtues of the several prophets, as tests whereby to try our own: and though we are far from combining in ourselves all their respective excellencies, yet there must be no grace which we allowedly neglect, or which we do not aspire after with our whole hearts. We must be Christians “not in word and in tongue, but in deed and in truth:” nor can we hope ever to be approved of our God, if we be not “Israelites indeed, in whom there is no guile.”]

By way of APPLICATION,

1. Let me speak to some a word of encouragement—

[Many are ready to say, “I can never hope to be numbered with the children of God.” But, if God chose Saul to an earthly kingdom, may he not choose us to one in a better world? If he fitted him for the discharge of earthly duties, may he not fit us for those which are heavenly? The exercise of sovereignty is the same in either case: and as there certainly was nothing in Saul to merit the distinction conferred on him, so may we hope that God’s sovereign choice may be fixed on us, though we are conscious that there is nothing in us to conciliate his regards. Perhaps, too, this may be done at a time that we least expect so great a blessing. Saul was occupied in seeking his father’s asses, when Samuel made known to him God’s purpose respecting him, and anointed him to the regal office. And who can tell? You may have come hither, at the present moment, with as little expectation of receiving any distinguished benefit as he: and yet this may be the hour when God will call you to his kingdom and glory, and give you “an unction from the Holy One” to prepare you for it. Look up to God; and pray that he would now, by his almighty power, make you, not only “another man,” but “a new creature in Christ Jesus:” so may you hope that it shall be done unto you; and that, as the Church of old, on seeing the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, “were amazed, and said, Is not this he that destroyed them who called on this name in Jerusalem?” so they may admire the grace of God in you, and, with joyful thanksgivings, may “glorify God in you.”]

2. Let me take up, over others, an affectionate lamentation—

[Respecting too many of you, alas! it must rather be asked, 'What! Is he not yet among the prophets?' Has he heard the word so long and so faithfully preached in vain?—Has the Spirit of God so often striven with him in vain?—Has he made so many good resolves in vain?—Alas! how aggravated is his guilt! and how awful will be his condemnation! Yes, Brethren, you must, many of you at least, be sensible, that no great and visible and lasting change has taken place in you, nothing that has excited the admiration of others, nothing that has called forth thanksgiving in yourselves. If you compare yourselves with the Prophets and Apostles of old, you can find in yourselves no real resemblance to them, either in zeal for God or in devotedness to His service. I would not, Brethren, that you should continue in this unhappy state. You may perhaps, when you see the prophets with "their tabret and their pipe," be ready to account it all enthusiasm: and I readily acknowledge, that now the melody must be rather in the heart, than in any external and audible expressions. But there must be the praises of God both in your heart and in your mouth; and your whole life also must testify that "God is with you of a truth." Be in earnest, then, and seek without delay converting grace: and, "whilst ye have the light, walk in the light, that ye may become the children of the light."]

CCXCIII

THE ISRAELITES' REJECTION OF SAMUEL REPROVED

1 Sam. 12:16–23. Now therefore stand and see this great thing, which the Lord will do before your eyes. Is it not wheat harvest to-day? I will call unto the Lord, and he shall send thunder and rain; that ye may perceive and see that your wickedness is great, which ye have done in the sight of the Lord, in asking you a king. So Samuel called unto the Lord; and the Lord sent thunder and rain that day: and all the people greatly feared the Lord and Samuel. And all the people said unto Samuel, Pray for thy servants unto the Lord thy God, that we die not: for we have added unto all our sins this evil, to ask us a king. And Samuel said unto the people, Fear not: ye have done all this wickedness: yet turn not aside from following the Lord, but serve the Lord with all your heart; and turn ye not aside: for then should ye go after vain things, which cannot profit nor deliver; for they are vain. For the Lord will not forsake his people for his great name's sake: because it hath pleased the Lord to make you his people. Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you.

THERE is scarcely any more curious part of sacred history than that which relates to the appointment of Saul to the throne of Israel. He was a man of noble stature, but of a low family. His father's asses had strayed, and he went with a servant three days in search of them. His provisions were exhausted; and he thought of returning home, lest his father should begin to be anxious about him. His servant understanding that they were not far from the abode of Samuel, whom they supposed to be a kind of magician, and capable of informing them where the asses were, proposed that they should call upon him, and seek that information at his hands: but having no money left to pay this magician for his trouble, they were discouraged; having no idea that he would give his advice without a fee. The servant however said he had the fourth part of a shekel (about seven-pence of our money) left, and that they would offer him that. Accordingly they went; and were informed that the asses were found. But Saul had further information, that quite astonished him. The people of Israel had requested Samuel to appoint a king over them; and God, on being applied to by Samuel, directed him to comply with their request; and told him moreover, that this very Saul was the person whom he should appoint. Accordingly he told Saul what God had ordained; and gave him several signs whereby he should know infallibly that the matter was of God: and then convoked the people, and drew lots before the Lord; and Saul was the person on whom the lot fell. Saul, through modesty, hid himself; but God disclosed to Samuel the place where he was hid: and Samuel sent for him, and committed to him the charge of the kingdom, for which God then fitted him by some special gifts.

Were we to judge only from that part of the history to which we have already alluded, we should suppose that this change in the constitution of Israel was pleasing to God: but Samuel, by divine command, declared the contrary, and condemned the people with great severity. This is related in the words of our text; from whence we shall be led to notice,

I. The sin committed—

The Israelites desired to change the form of their government, and to have a king appointed over them—

[For this desire they had many specious reasons. Samuel was now old, and incapable of supporting the fatigues of government: he had therefore delegated a large portion of his authority to his sons, who, alas! were far from walking in his steps, or executing aright the trust reposed in them. This was assigned as one reason for their request. But though this would have justified a request for Samuel's interposition to reprove, or even to depose, them, it was by no means a sufficient reason for them to seek an extinction of that form of government which God himself had appointed, and a substitution of another in its stead.

They were now also alarmed with the menaces of Nahash, king of the Ammonites, who was preparing to invade them: and they wished to have the power of their government vested in the hands of one who should be able to protect them. But they needed not an arm of flesh, whilst they had Jehovah for their king: and if Jehovah had not delivered them according to their desire, it was owing to themselves, who by their sins had forfeited his protection. They therefore should have made this an occasion of humiliation and of

turning unto God, and not an occasion of desiring another king in the place of God.

Besides, they wished to be in this respect like the nations around them, forgetting that a Theocracy was their highest honour, and most distinguished privilege.]

This desire of theirs was exceeding sinful—

[It was, in the first place, an act of great folly; for they enjoyed all the benefits of kingly government, without any of its expenses or of the evils generally arising out of it——In the next place, it was a mark of base ingratitude towards Samuel, who had spent his whole life in their service: and in this view Samuel could not but feel it, and complain of it. Yet so heavenly was his mind, that instead of resenting it, he committed it to God in prayer; and never complained of it till after the appointment of a king had been ratified and confirmed. Then indeed he appealed to them, whether he had not conducted himself towards them with the most unblemished integrity——But past services were of little account with persons so infatuated and self-willed as that people were at this time. But further, it was also a direct and open rejection of God himself. This was the construction which God himself put upon it. And how little HE deserved this treatment at their hands, Samuel shewed them, by recounting to them the mercies which he had vouchsafed unto their nation, from its first existence even to that day.

But they were deaf to every statement that he could make, and insensible to every feeling that should have actuated their minds: for who can convince those who are determined not to be convinced? “Nay; but we will,” is but a poor answer from those who are taught what God willeth. It is indeed the answer of sinners in general: but all who make such a reply, will hear of it again from God himself.]

What we are to think of their conduct, will further appear from,

II. The reproof administered—

Such wickedness as this could not pass unreprieved. Samuel therefore “solemnly protested against them,” as God had commanded; and then proceeded to deal with them in that way which he conceived to be most conducive to their amendment:

1. He desired a judgment from God, with a view to their humiliation—

[There was not at that time any appearance of a storm, nor was the wheat harvest a season when storms often occurred. But he requested of God to manifest his displeasure by a sudden tempest: and immediately the thunders rolled, the rain descended in torrents, and the indignation of the Lord was clearly shewn; insomuch that “the people greatly feared both the Lord and Samuel.” Thus was the desired effect produced: the people saw that they had sinned; and entreated the intercession of Samuel, that they might not be punished according to their deserts. How different is the voice of God from that of man! that will convince the most obstinate, and soften the most obdurate: and, sooner or later, they who will not yield to the remonstrances of God’s servants, shall be spoken to in a way which they can neither gainsay nor resist.]

2. He proclaimed mercy from God with a view to their encouragement—

[There was nothing vindictive in the conduct of Samuel: he lamented that the people should act so wickedly, and that God should be so dishonoured; but he willingly sacrificed his own interests, and cheerfully resigned the power which had been committed to him. He saw how agitated the people were; and gladly embraced the opportunity of pouring balm into their wounds. He bade them “not fear;” for though they had sinned greatly, God would not utterly cast them off; and though there was nothing in them to induce him to shew mercy, he would be merciful to them “for his great name’s sake.” It was not for any merit of theirs that God had ever made them his people, but purely of his own sovereign will and pleasure: and, to shew them “the immutability of his counsel,” he would still continue his favours to them, notwithstanding this great transgression. They must however turn unto him, and cleave unto him, and no longer look unto the creature for deliverance; for on no other terms would he acknowledge them as his people, or vouchsafe unto them the blessings which he had reserved for them. As far as depended on himself, Samuel assured them, that he would harbour no resentment for the indignity offered him, but would continue to pray for them to his dying hour. Thus admirably did he temper severity with kindness, and soften fidelity with love.]

By way of IMPROVEMENT, let us BEWARE lest there be amongst us also any who reject God—

[If the rejection of Samuel was a rejection of God, what must a rejection of CHRIST be? and yet, how many are there who say of HIM, “We will not have this man to reign over us!” Yes, though expostulated with, and warned with all fidelity, how many persist in this awful determination! They say in effect to their minister, “As for the word that thou hast spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we will not hearken unto thee.” To disregard the voice of his faithful ministers may appear a small thing; but it is not really so; for Jesus identifies himself with his servants; “He that receiveth you, receiveth me; and he that receiveth me, receiveth him that sent me.” Beware then, Brethren, how you presume to set aside the authority of Christ, or to place a rival upon his throne. God may give you your own way; but it will be a curse to you, and not a blessing. Woe be unto you indeed, if you provoke God to “choose your delusions.” He says of Israel, “I gave them a king in mine anger, and took him away in my wrath;” as you know he did, in a miserable and disgraceful manner. Beware lest such be the termination of your ways also, and lest you “be given up to believe a lie, as a prelude to your final condemnation.” The direction of God to you is clear; “O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself; but in ME is thy help: I will be thy King.” Let this counsel be welcomed by you; and your submission to his government shall ere long be followed by a participation of his glory.]

DEVOTION TO GOD URGED FROM A SENSE OF GRATITUDE

1 Sam. 12:23, 24. I will teach you the good and the right way: only fear the Lord, and serve him in truth with all your heart: for consider how great things he hath done for you.

A ZEAL for the honour of God, and a concern for the welfare of men's souls, are the most striking features of a spiritual mind; and, when truly felt, will swallow up all selfish considerations, and take occasion, even from injuries received, to display their energy towards those who have injured us. This disposition was manifested in no small degree by the Prophet Samuel, who, having long been the teacher, the governor, and the deliverer of Israel, was deposed, though not by force, yet by the unanimous wishes of his nation, who desired to have a king after the manner of the surrounding nations. Instead of expressing any resentment against them for this indignity, he only inquired of them whether they could charge him with any mal-administration, and then assured them of a continued interest in his prayers, and exhorted them to serve the Lord with their whole hearts.

His words will naturally lead us to consider,

I. The duty here inculcated—

All, who believe the existence of God, acknowledge that he is worthy to be feared and served: but when our duty to him is practically enforced, too many cry out against it as the offspring of superstition and the parent of fanaticism.

Let us mark then with precision what our duty is—

[To fear God, is, to regulate our conduct by the unerring standard of his word, avoiding carefully every thing which may displease him, and doing with diligence whatever is pleasing in his sight. But this must be done "in truth:" it is not a feigned obedience that will suffice: hypocritical services, however specious, must be odious to God: "He requireth truth in our inward parts:" and though "he will not be extreme to mark" our unavoidable infirmities, he will fearfully resent every instance of dissimulation: "He cannot be deceived, and will not be mocked:" to be accepted of him, we must be "Israelites indeed, and without guile." Moreover, our services must be, not like the constrained obedience of a slave, but the willing expressions of filial regard; they must be done "with all our heart." If, like "Amaziah, we did that which was materially right in the sight of the Lord, yet not with a perfect heart," it would be of no avail: we must, like Hezekiah, "do it with all our heart" if we would "prosperb." Nothing must be deemed too hard to do, or too great to suffer, that God may be glorified. David's direction to Solomon to "serve the God of his father with a perfect heart and a willing mind," completely expresses the nature of our duty as it is inculcated in the text.]

Let us next observe the importance of this duty—

[In the text it is said to be a right, and good, and necessary way; and not only in comparison of other ways, but to the exclusion of all others. They indeed, who most faithfully enforce the practice of this duty, are often reproached as deceivers, that would impose upon weak minds, and lead astray the ignorant and unwary. The example of the world is urged in opposition to them as a better standard of right and wrong than the Holy Scriptures. Nevertheless we must insist with Samuel that this way is "right;" "the broad road" of sin and self-indulgence leads men to destruction; and "the narrow path alone of holiness and self-denial leadeth unto life." Nor is this way merely despised, as erroneous; it is also reprobated, as pernicious; and both they who teach it and they who follow it, are often deemed the very bane of society. While the drunkard and the whoremonger are respected, and excused, "he that departeth from evil is considered as a prey," which all are at liberty to hunt and devour. But the testimony of Samuel, confirmed as it is by numberless other passages of Holy Writ, is sufficient to outweigh all that the blind votaries of sin and Satan can bring against religion. It is most assuredly, not only the right, but the "good" way; and though other ways may be more pleasing to flesh and blood, there is not any so productive of happiness, so perfective of our nature, or so conducive to the welfare of society.

Many, who feel convinced that fervent piety is both right and good, yet will not be persuaded that it is necessary. They acknowledge perhaps that ministers, and others who are detached from worldly engagements, should cultivate the fear of God: but a just attention to divine things seems to them incompatible with their own peculiar state and calling. Let none however imagine that any lawful calling is an impediment to religion: Adam even in Paradise had work assigned him by God himself, as being no less subservient to the welfare of his soul than to the health of his body. The truth is, that religion is "the one thing needful;" nor though, like Samuel or David, we had a kingdom to govern, could we plead any exemption on account of the multiplicity or importance of our engagements. The word of God to every living creature is, "Fear God, and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.]"

That while we acknowledge our duty we may also be led to practise it, let us consider,

II. The argument with which it is enforced—

The Jews were singularly indebted to God for their deliverance from Egypt, their preservation in the wilderness, their investiture in the promised land, and the many wonderful interpositions of the Deity on their behalf in the time of their Judges. But waving any further mention of them, let us call to mind the mercies vouchsafed to us:

1. The temporal—

[Numberless are the blessings which every individual amongst us has received; as are those also, which are conferred upon the

nation at large. But on the present occasion it will be proper to contemplate rather the privileges we enjoy in our corporate capacity——And should not these operate as inducements to fidelity and diligence in the service of our God? Does not every favour bestowed upon us address us, as it were, in the words of Samuel, “Only fear the Lord? Does it not bind us also, according to the ability and opportunities afforded us, to teach others “the good and the right way?” Instead then of making our situation an occasion for carnality, or an excuse for lukewarmness, let us endeavour to “render to the Lord according to the benefits he has conferred upon us.”]

2. The spiritual—

[As the most signal mercies imparted to the Jewish nation were typical of far richer benefits reserved for the Christian Church, we should but ill consult the scope of the text, and still less the advancement of our eternal interests, if we should omit to mention our obligations to God for spiritual blessings. “Consider” then that stupendous act of mercy, the gift of God’s dear Son: consider that he was given up to death, even the accursed death of the cross, for us sinners, for the recovery of our souls from death and hell, and for the restoration of them to the divine favour; how unfathomable the mystery! how incomprehensible the love! The terms too upon which God will accept sinners; how easy, how simple, how suited to our lost and helpless nature! We have only to “believe in Christ, and we shall be saved.” Can any thing be more encouraging; or lay us under greater obligations to obedience? Consider farther, the benefits we receive by believing: we are instantly brought into the family of God; we enjoy sweet “fellowship with the Father and the Son;” we have the sting of death taken away; and we have an eternal inheritance in heaven: shall all this love have no constraining influence? shall it not cause us to present ourselves as living sacrifices to God, that we may both live to him who died for us, and glorify God with our bodies and our spirits which are his? Yes; such were the sentiments of an inspired Apostle; nor can any rational being controvert or doubt such self-evident deductions. Let us then apply them in confirmation of the text, and fix them on our minds as motives to serve God with all our hearts. Let us put away that worldliness and sensuality, which are the bane and curse of our souls. Let us discard formality, that blinding, that deluding sin. Let us also abhor hypocrisy, that basest of all sins. Let us serve our God, not with a few outward ceremonies, but with the inward devotion of our hearts! Let us not study how we may contract our regards to him into the smallest possible space; but how we may glorify his name, and advance his interests. And while we thus cultivate the fear of him in our own hearts, let us, with Samuel, labour to the utmost, that he may be feared and served by all around us.]

CCXCV

SAUL’S IMPATIENCE

1 Sam. 13:11–13. And Samuel said, What hast thou done? And Saul said, Because I saw that the people were scattered from me, and that thou camest not within the days appointed, and that the Philistines gathered themselves together at Michmash; therefore said I, The Philistines will come down now upon me to Gilgal, and I have not made supplication unto the Lord; I forced myself therefore, and offered a burnt-offering. And Samuel said to Saul, Thou hast done foolishly.

IN a reply which Elihu made to Job, it is confidently asked, “Is it fit to say to a king, Thou art wicked; and to princes, Ye are ungodly?” To this I answer, that doubtless respect and deference are due to rank; but not to such an extent as to compromise fidelity to God, and fidelity to the souls of men. If a Herod take his brother’s wife, a servant of God must tell him plainly, “It is not lawful for thee to have her.” And if a Saul violate openly, before all, an express command of God, a Samuel does well to interrogate him, “What hast thou done?” and to tell him with an authoritative tone, “Thou hast done foolishly.” Even a young minister, in cases of a more flagrant nature, must consider himself as God’s ambassador, and must “rebuke with all authorityb.”

That we may understand exactly wherein Saul’s conduct was exceptionable, I will shew,

1. How far it was good and commendable—

We by no means condemn it altogether; for, in part, we think it deserving of praise. He did well,

1. In that he dared not to encounter his adversaries till he had implored help from God—

[What more becoming than this? Surely we may all learn from it. For, in ourselves, we are unable to do any good thing: and to undertake any thing in our own strength is the certain prelude to defeat. Nor is it in great and arduous matters alone that we should cry to God for help. Even “the thinking of a good thought” is beyond our power, without himd. Under all circumstances, therefore, we must betake ourselves to God, that he may “help our infirmities;” and must “be strong only in the Lord, and in the power of his mightf.”]

2. In that he sought after God in the ordinances of God’s own appointment—

["Burnt-offerings and peace-offerings” were appointed by God himself: the one to express our great need of mercy, through the sacrifice of Christ; and the other to express our gratitude for mercies received through him. Both of these were called for, and, in fact, are required of us also continually; because there can be no situation so favourable, but we need mercy; nor any situation so

distressing, but we have abundant cause for thankfulness to Almighty God. The direction given us is, "In every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving to make our requests known to God." It is the due mixture of humiliation and gratitude that renders our addresses pleasing unto God. The very praises of all the heavenly hosts attest this to be the proper frame of a creature in the presence of his Creator: and therefore, whilst we applaud the union of both the offerings in the instance before us, let us take care to imitate it in all our addresses at the throne of grace.]

The reproof, however, that was given him, requires me to point out,

II. In what respects it was foolish and blame-worthy—

At first sight, it seems as if he had usurped the priestly office: but I think that the enormity of such a crime could not fail to have been noticed in the reproof that was administered. I therefore forbear to allege that as any part of the accusation that is to be brought against him. His crime seems to have consisted principally in,

1. His unbelieving precipitancy, in curtailing the appointed time—

[It is evident, from the acknowledgment of Saul himself, that he had been commanded to wait seven days for Samuel, in order to receive direction from him. It is evident also, that though he had waited to the seventh day, he had not tarried to the close of it, but had, through impatience and unbelief, transgressed the divine command. His very apology shews this. His army were deserting him through fear; and the Philistines were just at hand: and he could not wait another hour, lest he should be overwhelmed before he had made supplication to his God. But why should he offer sacrifice, when that duty devolved not on him, but on Samuel alone? He might have prayed to God as fervently as he pleased, and have urged every soldier in his army to do the same. This would have been no offence: it would rather have been pleasing and acceptable to God. But he yielded to unbelief, instead of waiting patiently upon God in an assured expectation of his promised aid. Now, the direction given by God to all his people is, "He that believeth, shall not make haste." The promise made to Abraham, relative to the deliverance of his posterity from Egypt, was not performed till the very last day of the four hundred and thirty years was arrived: and, in appearance, the accomplishment of it was hopeless. But had God forgotten it? Or did he suffer it to fail? No: "on that self-same day" that he had so long before designated, "he brought them out:" and we, in like manner, "however long the vision of our God may tarry, should wait for it, assured that it shall not tarry one instant beyond the appointed time," and that "not a jot or tittle of God's word shall ever fail.]"

2. His unwarranted dependence on a merely ritual observance—

[He evidently thought that the performance of this ceremony was the only effectual way to secure for himself and his people a deliverance from their impending danger. But how absurd was this thought! Could it be supposed, that to disobey God's commands was the right way to conciliate his favour? or that the performance of a ceremony would supersede the necessity for his powerful intervention? Might not a moment's reflection have told him, that "to obey was better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams?" Yet thus it is with multitudes amongst ourselves, who, if they do but attend upon the house of God, and go to the table of the Lord, and perform a few other external duties, imagine that all shall be well with them. We forget that God looks at the heart; and utterly despises every offering we can present unto him, if it be not accompanied with real integrity, both of heart and life. His express declaration is, that "the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the Lord, especially when he bringeth it with a wicked mind." Let us then be aware of this. Let us fast and pray, and use all other means of obtaining help from God; but let us not expect the blessing from the means, but only from God in, and by, the means. Then shall we never be disappointed of our hope, but shall have daily increasing occasion to say, "Thanks be to God, who always causeth us to triumph in Christ!]"

LEARN, then, from hence,

1. Not to account any sin light—

[If any sin could be accounted light, certainly this of Saul might be so esteemed: for the enemy that pressed upon him was numerous as the sands upon the sea-shore, and well appointed in all respects; whilst his whole army consisted of only six hundred men, and not a single sword or spear amongst them all, except with himself and his son Jonathan. Under all these disadvantages, he had waited till the seventh day; and never, till he saw his men deserting him, and expected the enemy to come down instantly upon him, did he offer the sacrifice: and even then he did it with great reluctance. Yet for this sin he lost the kingdom to which God had called him. Now, we are apt to plead excuses just as he did; and to think that we are justified by a kind of necessity in our disobedience to God. But, whatsoever God has enjoined, that must we do, even though, for our obedience to him, we were to be cast the next hour into a fiery furnace, or a den of lions. I pray you, Brethren, settle this in your minds as an invariable principle, that nothing under heaven can justify us in violating a divine command.]

2. Wherein true wisdom consists—

[Whatever we may imagine, or whatever the world may say, disobedience to God will be found folly in the extreme; yes, and replete with danger, too, to our immortal souls. Wisdom and piety are one: and it is not without reason that, throughout all the writings of Solomon, they are identified. I would earnestly entreat you therefore, Brethren, not only to ask yourselves from day to day, "What have I done?" but to compare your doings with the commandments of God. Even your religious services I would wish to be brought to the same test, that you may see how far they accord with the divine command, and how far they differ from it. God will not judge

as we judge: no; he will judge righteous judgments, and will reject with abhorrence many of the services on which we place a very undue reliance. To be accepted of him, your faith must be simple, and your obedience unreserved. Abraham's conduct is the pattern which you must follow. "Go, Abraham, and offer up your son, your only son, Isaac." Here was no disputing against the divine command, nor any doubt in executing it, though he had three whole days to ruminate upon it. No: he knew, that if Isaac should be reduced to ashes upon the altar, God could raise him up again; and would do it, rather than suffer his promise to fail. To the execution of God's command he therefore set himself without delay. And do ye also act with like promptitude and zeal, and "be strong in faith, giving glory to God." This will prove wisdom in the issue; and will prove as conducive to your own happiness, as to the honour of that God whom you love and serve.]

CCXCVI

JONATHAN'S VICTORY OVER THE PHILISTINES

1 Sam. 14:6. And Jonathan said to the young man that bare his armour, Come, and let us go over unto the garrison of these uncircumcised: it may be that the Lord will work for us: for there is no restraint to the Lord to save by many or by few.

SO frequent are the wonders recorded in the Scripture, that we scarcely notice them; yet so great are they, that it is rather owing to our inattention, than to any real exercise of faith, that we do not reject them as altogether incredible and fabulous. This account of Jonathan is inferior to few, either in the strangeness of his feats, or the magnitude of their results. That we may have a clear view of the matter, we shall shew,

I. The state to which the Israelites were reduced—

The consequences of their choice began now plainly to appear—

[They had desired a king, and had persisted in their request, notwithstanding all the expostulations of Samuel; and God had complied with their request. But Saul had not possessed the throne of Israel two years, before his kingdom was overcome by the Philistines, and brought into a state of the basest servitude. The Philistines would not so much as suffer the Israelites to have a smith of their own, lest he should make arms for them: so determined were they to keep the Israelites in the lowest state of subjection. Yet whilst they were in this state, Saul was imprudent enough to smite a garrison of the Philistines, and thereby to give his enemies a plea for utterly destroying the whole nation. Accordingly the Philistines called all their forces together, "thirty thousand chariots, six thousand horsemen, and foot soldiers as the sands on the sea-shore for number;" whilst Saul had but six hundred men, and not a single sword to be found amongst them all. To make their situation still more deplorable, Saul presumed to invade the priestly office, and to offer sacrifices to God without waiting the full time for Samuel that he had been expressly enjoined to wait; and thus he provoked God to take away from him the kingdom, and to transfer it to a person who should prove more worthy of it. Thus speedily was the nation reduced to ruin under that government which they had been so anxious to obtain.]

And such consequences may justly be apprehended by all who are bent upon their own wishes, in opposition to the mind and will of God—

[There is the same self-will in all of us: we do not like that God should choose for us: we think that we can contrive better for ourselves than he has done. If we feel any evil in existing circumstances, we do not so much consider how we may obtain his favour, as how we may ward off the effects of his displeasure. But inordinate desire of any kind will bring its own punishment along with it: and we shall all find at last, that our truest happiness consists, not in the accomplishment of our own will, or the gratification of our own desires, but in the favour and protection of Almighty God——Perhaps there is not a man to be found, who must not after mature reflection acknowledge, that, if God had suffered him in some particular instance to attain his own wishes, or execute his own desires, he would have rendered himself the most miserable of the human race——]

But, if we see God's hand in their punishment, much more do we in their deliverance. Let us therefore consider,

II. The means by which their deliverance was effected—

When nothing but utter destruction could be expected, God was pleased to interpose for them. He stirred up the minds of Jonathan and his armour-bearer to go and attack a garrison, that, humanly speaking, was invincible even by a considerable force; and that too even in open day. They climbed up the rock in the very sight of their enemies, slew about twenty of them on the spot, spread terror through the whole camp of the Philistines, gave an opportunity for Saul and his adherents to pursue the fugitives, and would have utterly destroyed the whole Philistine army, if the rashness of Saul had not deprived his men of that refreshment which their exhausted strength required.

Wonderful was this victory, and most instructive: in contemplating it we cannot but SEE,

1. That God can work by the weakest means—

[Nothing can be conceived more inadequate to the occasion than the means that were here used——But God delights to magnify his own strength in his people's weakness, and to interpose for their deliverance in their greatest straits. It is for this very purpose

that he often waits, till we are reduced to the lowest extremity. It was for that end that he reduced the hosts of Gideon from two and thirty thousand to three hundred; that the glory of their victory might be all his own. Whatever straits then or difficulties we maybe in, we should consider that God is all-sufficient; and that “the things which are impossible to man, are possible with him.”]

2. That a hope of his aid should encourage our exertions—

[Two things encouraged Jonathan; the one, “There is no restraint to the Lord to save, whether by many or by few;” and the other, “It may be that the Lord will work for us.” And what greater encouragement can we want? for, “if God be for us, who can be against us?” When therefore we are tempted, from a view of our own weakness, to say, “There is no hope,” we should call to mind “the great and precious promises” which God has given to us in his word, and the wonderful deliverances he has vouchsafed to his people in every age. In dependence upon him we should go forth, fearing nothing. Being “strong in the Lord and in the power of his might,” we should gird on our armour, or even go forth with a sling and a stone against every enemy, not doubting but that, like Goliath of old, he shall ere long fall before us.]

3. That faith in him will ensure to us the victory—

[“Who ever trusted in him and was confounded?” See what wonders have been wrought by faith in former ages; and shall it have less efficacy now? Will it not still, as formerly, bring Omnipotence to our aid? Only have “faith as a grain of mustard-seed,” and all mountains shall melt before you. Whilst faith is in exercise, we need not be afraid of viewing the obstacles that are in our way. Be it so, the enemy is entrenched on an almost inaccessible rock, and we cannot even get to him but in such a way as must expose us to instant death: be it so, that we have no one on our side, except perhaps a single companion as helpless as ourselves: be it so, that our enemy is not only prepared for our reception, but laughing to scorn our feeble attempts against him: it matters nothing; the victory is ours, if we go forth in faith; and not only “shall the devil flee from us, if we resist him thus in faith,” but all his hosts also shall be put to flight, and “Satan himself shall be bruised under our feet shortly.”

Let those then who are ready to give way to desponding fears remember on what a “Mighty One their help is laid,” and let them “be strong in faith, giving glory to Godg.”]

CCXCVII

MOURNING FOR THE SINS OF OTHERS

1 Sam. 15:11. And it grieved Samuel; and he cried unto the Lord all night.

NEVER can we be weary of contemplating the scripture history; so diversified are its incidents, and so instructive the examples it sets before us. The whole life of Samuel, from his first dedication to God by his mother to the very hour of his death, was one uniform course of piety. That particular part of it which I propose at present to consider, is his conduct in reference to Saul, when God declared his purpose to rend the kingdom from him, and to transfer it to another who should shew himself more worthy of it: we are told, “it grieved Samuel: and he cried unto the Lord all night.”

In discoursing on these words, we shall notice,

I. The pious grief of Samuel—

Respecting this we shall distinctly consider,

1. The grounds of it—

[Saul had disobeyed the commandment of the Lord, in sparing Agag the king of the Amalekites, together with all the best of the spoil, when he had been strictly enjoined to destroy every thing, “man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.”

This, at first sight, might appear a venial fault, inasmuch as he had leaned to the side of mercy, and had acted in conformity with the wishes of his people; and had even consulted, as he thought, the honour of God, to whom he intended to offer all the best of the cattle in sacrifice.

But he had received a specific commission, which it was his duty to execute. He was not left at liberty to act according to circumstances: his path was marked out, and should have been rigidly adhered to.

It does not appear that he stopped short of his purpose, because he thought that the command itself was too severe: for, in the first instance, he set himself to execute it fully: but, if he had felt some reluctance on account of its severity, he had no alternative left him: it was his duty simply to obey. When Abraham was called to come out from his country and from his kindred, he obeyed, though he knew not which way he was to direct his steps. And, when he was enjoined to offer up upon an altar his own son Isaac, he hesitated not to do it; notwithstanding he knew that on the life of Isaac, to whose lineal descendants all the promises were made, the coming even of the Messiah himself essentially depended. Had he judged it right to listen to carnal reasonings of any kind, or to put his own feelings in competition with his duty, he might have easily found enough to satisfy his own mind. But he knew what was the duty of a creature: and he obeyed it without reserve. And so should Saul have done. We will take for granted that all his excuses

were true; (though we doubt much whether covetousness was not the true source of his conduct:) still they were of no real weight: and his listening to them was nothing less than an act of rebellion against God.

And was not this a sufficient ground for grief? Yes: and Samuel did well in that he was grieved with it.

Doubtless Samuel was also grieved on account of the judgment which Saul had brought on himself and on his family, by this act of disobedience. He pitied the man who had subjected himself so grievously to the divine displeasure: and pitied his children also, who were involved both in his guilt and punishment. When he himself, indeed, had been dispossessed of the kingdom, we do not find that he was grieved either for himself or his children: but for Saul and his children he deeply grieved. In his own case, Samuel had nothing to deplore: whilst he fell a victim to the ingratitude of man, he had a testimony from the whole nation, and from God himself, that he had discharged his duty towards them with fidelity: but in the case of Saul, he saw the man who had been specially called by God to the kingdom, now dispossessed of it by that very God who had appointed him, and under his heavy and merited displeasure. In a word, the sin and the punishment of Saul formed in the mind of Samuel one ground of deep and undissembled grief.]

2. The expression of it—

[By God the sentence against Saul had been pronounced; and none but God could reverse it. But so often, and in such astonishing instances, had God condescended to the prayers of his servants, yea, to the prayers of Samuel himself, that this holy man did not despair of yet obtaining mercy for his unhappy prince. He, therefore, betook himself to prayer, and continued in it all the night, hoping that, like Israel of old, he should at last prevail. With what “strong crying and tears” may we suppose he urged his suit! And what an extraordinary measure of compassion must he have exercised, when he could continue in supplication for a whole night together! Such had been his feelings towards the people at large, after they had rejected him: “God forbid that I should sin against the Lord, in ceasing to pray for you.” And such is the proper expression of love, whether towards God or man: for God it honours as a merciful and gracious God; whilst it seeks to benefit man, by bringing down upon him the blessing of the Most High.]

But, in contemplating his example, we are chiefly called to notice,

II. The instruction to be derived from it—

In this record we may see what should be our conduct,

1. In reference to the sins of others—

[It is amazing with what indifference the universal prevalence of sin is beheld by the generality of mankind. Those evils which tend to the destruction of all social comfort are indeed reprobated by men of considerate minds: but it is in that view alone that they are reprobated. As offending God, they are scarcely thought of: men may live altogether as “without God in the world,” and no one will lay it to heart, or shew the least concern about the dishonour which is done to God.

The eternal interests of men too, it is surprising how little they are thought of. Men are dying all around us, and no one inquires whether they are prepared to die: and, when they are launched into eternity, no one feels any anxiety about their state, or entertains any doubt about their happiness before God. It is taken for granted that all who die are happy. Whether they sought after God or not, all is supposed to be well with them: and to express a doubt respecting it would be deemed the essence of uncharitableness and presumption.

But widely different from this should be the state of our minds. We are not indeed called to sit in judgment upon men: but to feel compassion towards them, and to pray for them, is our bounden duty. David tells us that “horror seized hold upon him,” and “rivers of waters ran down his cheeks, because men kept not God’s Law.” The Prophet Jeremiah exclaimed, “O that mine head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!” Thus was it also with Samuel, in relation to Saul; and thus should it be with us, in reference to all around us. To see them dishonouring God and ruining their own souls, ought to create in us the same emotions as were felt by the Apostle Paul, when he declared that he had “great heaviness and continual sorrow in his heart for his brethren’s sake.” Even though we have no hope of doing them good, yet should we, like our blessed Saviour, weep over them, saying, “O that thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things that belong unto thy peace!” Nor should we ever cease to pray for them, in hope that God may be gracious unto them, and make them distinguished monuments of his grace.]

2. In reference to our own sins—

[Here is reason for the very same complaint. Men can violate every command of God, and feel no fear, no compunction. As for such a sin as Saul’s, it would not even be deemed a sin. ‘True, they have not strictly adhered to the divine command; but the command itself was too strict; and they complied with the solicitations of their friends; and they meant no harm.’ Hence, in their prayers, if they pray at all, there is no fervour, no importunity, no continuance. A transient petition or two is quite as much as their necessities require.

But did Samuel feel such grief for another, and should not we for ourselves? Did he cry to God all night for another, and should we scarcely offer a petition for ourselves? Should the deposing of another from an earthly kingdom appear a judgment to be deprecated, and shall we not deprecate the loss of heaven for ourselves? Verily, in neglecting to pray for ourselves, we not only sin against God, but grievously sin also against our own souls.]

Let me then ADDRESS myself,

1. To those who are in a state of careless indifference—

[Alas! What a large proportion of every assembly does this comprise! What then shall I say unto you? To Samuel, whose grief for Saul was inconsolable, God said, "How long wilt thou mourn for Saul?" But to you I must say, How long will ye refuse to mourn for yourselves? Has not your impenitence continued long enough? Many, of you have sinned against God, not in one act only, but in the whole course of your lives; and that, too, not in a way of partial obedience only, like Saul, but in direct and wilful disobedience. Will not ye, then, weep and pray? Remember, I entreat you, that if you will not humble yourselves before God, you must be humbled ere long; and if you will not weep now, you must ere long "weep, and wail, and gnash your teeth for ever" in that place where redemption can never come, nor one ray of hope can ever enter. I beseech you, Brethren, reflect on this; and now, whilst the sentence that is gone forth against you may be reversed, cease not to cry unto your God for mercy day and night.]

2. To those who are desirous of obtaining mercy from God—

[Great as was Samuel's interest with God, he could not prevail for Saul. But you have an Advocate, whose intercessions for you must of necessity prevail, if only you put your cause into his hands. This "Advocate is the Lord Jesus Christ, who is also the propitiation for your sins." To him St. John directs you: and, if you go to him, it is impossible that you should ever perish: for he has expressly said, "Him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out." To have a praying friend or minister is a great comfort to one who feels his need of mercy: but to have One who "ever liveth on purpose to make intercession for us," and "whom the Father heareth always," this is a comfort indeed. Commit then your cause, Brethren, into the Saviour's hands; and you may rest assured, that, whatever judgments you may have merited at God's hands, "you shall never perish, but shall have eternal life."]

CCXCVIII

SAUL'S SELF-DECEIT

1 Sam. 15:13–16. And Samuel came to Saul: and Saul said unto him, Blessed be thou of the Lord: I have performed the commandment of the Lord. And Samuel said, What meaneth then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear? And Saul said, They have brought them from the Amalekites: for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen, to sacrifice unto the Lord thy God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed. Then Samuel said unto Saul, Stay, and I will tell thee what the Lord hath said to me this night.

IF the Holy Scriptures exhibit to us the most perfect patterns of righteousness, they also bring to our view men devoid of righteousness, and living characters of wickedness under all its diversified forms and operations. In truth, if we read them only as records of past events, without an application of them to our own business and bosoms, we may be amused and instructed by them, but we shall not be greatly edified. But if we view them as mirrors, in which our own countenance, and the countenances of those around us, are reflected, then, indeed, do we reap from them the benefit which they were intended to convey. Let us, then, take this view of the history before us, and see in it the state of the ungodly world at this time. Let us see in it,

I. Their presumptuous confidence—

Saul had been commanded to destroy the whole nation of Amalek, and every thing belonging to them: but he spared the best of their cattle; and yet boasted to Samuel, that he had "performed the commandment of the Lord." In this we see the conduct of multitudes around us.

We all have received a commandment to wage war with our spiritual enemies, and to "destroy the whole body of sin"—

[Not only is "our reigning lust" to be mortified, but every sinful disposition, though it be dear to us as "a right eye," or apparently necessary to us as "a right handc."]

But, whilst much remains unmodified, we take credit to ourselves as having fulfilled the will of God—

[The great majority of men, if not living in very flagrant iniquity, think, and wish others to think, that they have fulfilled the will of God, so far at least as not to leave them any material ground for shame and sorrow on account of their iniquities. See the self-complacent state of all around us. In the habit of their minds, they plainly say, "We have performed the commandment of the Lord," and have ground for commendation on that account——]

But they stand reprov'd, one and all of them, by,

II. Their glaring inconsistency—

The very beasts which Saul had spared, convicted him of falsehood—

[It was impossible for him to resist the evidence which the bleating of the sheep and the lowing of the oxen gave of his disobedience.]

And is there not equal evidence of the self-deceit of those around us?

[You say you have obeyed the voice of the Lord. Let me then ask, What means that worldliness which is so visible to all who behold you? Is it not clear and manifest, that the great mass of those who take credit to themselves on account of their obedience to God,

are as much addicted to the world as any other persons whatever? They may be free from its grosser vices; but their cares, their pleasures, their company, their entire lives, shew indisputably whose they are, and to whom they belong. They are altogether “of the earth, earthly.”

And what means their impenitence, which is as manifest as the sun at noon-day? Who ever sees their tears, or hears their sighs and groans on account of indwelling sin? Who ever beholds them crying to God for mercy; and fleeing, like the man-slayer, with all possible earnestness, to the hope set before him in the Gospel? Does the heart-searching God behold any more of this in the secret chamber, than man beholds in the domestic circle, or in the public assembly?

I say, then, What means all this indifference to heavenly things? It is as clear a demonstration of their disobedience to God, as were “the bleating of the sheep, and the lowing of the oxen,” of Saul’s hypocrisy.]

But in the reply of Saul to his reprover, we see,

III. Their vain excuses—

Saul cast the blame of his misconduct upon the people—

[Not only does he speak of them as the agents whom he could not control, but he declares that they were the authors of his disobedience, inasmuch as he was constrained to sanction their conduct through fear of their displeasure.]

This is the very rock on which all self-complacent Pharisees are wont to stumble—

[It is not owing to any want of inclination in themselves, that they do not serve God more perfectly, they will say, but to their situation and circumstances in life. It would be in vain for them to stem the torrent that carries all before it. Were they to follow the Lord fully, and to carry into effect the commands of God according to their full import, they should be altogether singular: and therefore they conform to the will of others, not from inclination, but necessity.

But let me ask, Are we to obey man in opposition to God? Are we to “follow a multitude to do evil?” Even Saul himself acknowledged, that in such a compliance “he had greatly sinned:” and we may be sure that no such excuses will avail us at the judgment-seat of Christ.]

Let me, then, declare to you,

IV. Their impending fate—

Saul was rejected of his God—

[He might have urged in his behalf, that the command which had been given him, left him a discretion to exercise mercy: and, at all events, his desire had been to honour God with sacrifices which must otherwise have been withheld. But the commands of God leave nothing to our discretion. We are not at liberty to restrict any one of them; but are bound to execute them all in their full extent. And as Saul, in deviating from God’s command, had, in fact, “rejected the word of the Lord, God, in righteous indignation, rejected him.”]

And what better fate awaits us who limit the commands of God?

[It is in vain for us to dispute against the commands of God, as too strict, or too difficult. We are not called to dispute, but to obey. Nor is it a partial obedience that will suffice: nor are we at liberty to commute obedience for sacrifice. Nothing is left to us, but to obey: and, if we would please the Lord, we must “follow him fully:” our obedience must be entire and unreserved: and, if it be not unreserved, we are guilty of direct and positive “rebellion, which is declared by God himself to be, in his sight, even as idolatry:” for, whatever we may think to the contrary, there is little to choose between disobedience to the true God, and obedience to a false one.

I declare, then, to all of you, my Brethren, that, to whatever privileges you have been exalted by God himself, you will have reason to curse the day wherein you ever listened to man in opposition to God, or withheld from God the entire obedience of your souls. By whatever excuses you may palliate such conduct, I declare to you, before God, that it is rebellion against him, and that, as rebels, he will reject you in the day of judgment.]

As an IMPROVEMENT of this subject, there is one thing only which I would say; and that is, Take the Holy Scriptures, in every thing, for your guide—

[Call not any thing “A hard saying.” You may not be able to understand the reasons of God’s commands, or to appreciate his reasons aright, if they were stated to you. Doubtless, to study their real import is your duty: but when that is once ascertained, you have nothing to do but to obey them. You are not to sit in judgment upon them, or to lower their demands. If the whole world urge you to depart from them, you are in no wise to comply. For God you are to live: and, if need be, for God you are to die. It is on these terms alone that you can ever be acknowledged as Christ’s disciples. If, then, “you have been called to God’s kingdom and glory,” see that you “walk worthy of your high calling.” “Be faithful unto death, and God will give you the crown of life.”]

CCXCIX

SAUL’S DISOBEDIENCE AND PUNISHMENT

1 Sam. 15:22, 23. And Samuel said, Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and

stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because thou hast rejected the word of the Lord, he hath also rejected thee from being king.

THE sins of God's enemies, and especially of those who obstruct his people in their way to Canaan, will certainly be punished: God indeed may bear long with them, even so long as to make them tauntingly exclaim, "Where is the promise of his coming?" but he will surely come at last, to their utter confusion and their eternal condemnation.

The Amalekites had very cruelly attacked the Israelites in the wilderness, and without any just occasion. God therefore gave them up to the sword of Joshua, and commanded that his people should in due time inflict upon them far more extensive judgments. The time was now come that their iniquities were full: and therefore God commanded Saul to execute upon them the threatening which had been denounced several hundred years before. This command Saul neglected to execute as he should have done; and thereby brought upon himself the heavy displeasure of his God. We behold in our text,

I. The sin reproved—

It might appear a small thing in Saul to spare Agag and the best of the cattle, when he had been enjoined to destroy all; and his vindication of himself to Samuel has an air of plausibility about it, which might almost reconcile us to this act as not very exceptionable: but Samuel, in the words before us, characterises the conduct of Saul,

1. As rebellion—

[The command which had been given was exceeding plain and strong. The solemnity with which it was given, "Hearken thou," & c.; the reason assigned for it, "What Amalek did to Israel in the way from Egypt;" the minuteness to which the order descended, "Go, smite Amalek, and destroy—utterly—all that they have—and spare them not—but slay man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass:" all this shewed that there was no option left him, no discretion; but that the whole was to be executed according to the command. Yet behold, through pride and covetousness he departed from the command, sparing Agag, to grace his triumph; and preserving the best of the flocks and herds, to enrich himself and his people. Thus by executing the command in part, and violating it in part, he shewed, that he made his own will, and not the will of God, the rule of his conduct. And what was this but rebellion against the Most High? It was justly so characterised by Samuel: and such is the interpretation which God will surely put on such conduct, wheresoever it be found. To be "partial in the law" is, in fact, to set aside the law; and to "offend against it willingly in any one point, is to be guilty of all"——]

2. A stubbornness—

[Saul, on meeting Samuel, took credit to himself for having fulfilled the will of God. Thus it is that sin blinds the eyes of men, and puffs them up with a conceit of having merited the divine approbation by actions which in their principle and in their measure have been radically wrong.

Samuel, to convince him of his sin, appealed to "the bleating of the sheep, and the lowing of the oxen:" but Saul, with stubbornness of heart, persisted in avowing his innocence: yea, after the strongest remonstrances on the part of Samuel, authorized as they were, and commanded, by God himself, he still maintained, that he had done his duty, and that the people only were to blame; nor were they materially wrong, since they had consulted no interest of their own, but only the honour of their God.

Here we see how sin hardens the heart also, and disposes men to resist conviction to the uttermost. Thus it was with our first parents at the first introduction of sin into the world: both of them strove to cast off the blame from themselves, the man on his wife, and the woman on the serpent: and how ready we are to tread in their steps, every day's observation and experience will teach us ——]

Let us next turn our attention to,

II. The reproof administered—

In our eyes perhaps this act of Saul may appear to have been only a slight and well-intentioned error; but in the sight of God it was a very grievous sin: for "rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry." Whatever we may imagine, the neglecting to serve the true God is but little different, in the estimation of our Judge, from the engaging in the service of a false god. Hence we find that the reproof administered was precisely such as the occasion called for.

We shall consider it in two points of view;

1. As exposing his sin—

[We are not to imagine that Samuel intended to disparage the sacrifices which God had commanded. The many testimonies which God had given of his favourable acceptance of them sufficiently shewed, that, when offered in a becoming manner, with humility of mind and a view to the Sacrifice which should in due time be offered, they were highly pleasing in his sight. But, if put in competition with moral duties, and substituted for obedience, they are hateful in the sight of God. He "requireth truth in the inward parts;" and more values the tribute of a thankful or contrite heart, than the cattle on a thousand hills. The excuse therefore that was offered by Saul was only a mockery and an insult to his God. And whoever shall attempt a commutation of outward services for inward integrity of heart and life, or shall think to atone for the want of one by the abundance of the other, will deceive himself to his eternal ruin ——]

2. As denouncing his punishment—

[God had before threatened to deprive him of the kingdom for presuming to offer sacrifices without waiting for Samuel according as he had been enjoined; and now that punishment was irreversibly decreed. A sign too was now given him, that it should in due time be executed: as he rent the garment of Samuel, whom he endeavoured to detain, so would God rend from him that kingdom, which he was so unworthy to possess. This itself was indeed but a slight punishment: but it was emblematic of the loss of God's eternal kingdom; a loss which no finite intellect can appreciate. Yet is that the loss which every creature shall sustain, who by his rebellion offends God, and by stubborn impenitence cuts off himself from all hope of mercy——]

We will conclude the subject with some ADVICE arising from it:

1. Learn how to estimate the path of duty—

[We are very apt to think that right which is most agreeable to our own wishes; and to lean rather to that which will gratify our pride or interest, than to that which calls for the exercise of self-denial. But we should be aware of the bias that is upon our own minds, and of our proneness to make the law of God bend to our prejudices and our passions. And we maybe sure, that if a doubt exist about the path of duty, moral duties must be preferred to ceremonial; and, in general, it will be found safer to lean to that which thwarts our natural inclinations, than to that which gratifies them.]

2. Be open to conviction respecting any deviations from it—

[There is an extreme aversion in us all to acknowledge that we have done amiss. But to be "stout-hearted is to be far from righteousness;" and wherever God sees such a disposition, he will surely abase it. We all see in others how ready they are to justify what is wrong, and to extenuate what they cannot justify. Let us remember that we also have this propensity; and let us guard against it to the utmost of our power. Let us rather, if we have erred, desire to find it out, and not rest till we have discovered it. We would not, if an architect were to warn us that our house were likely to fall, go and lie down in our beds without carefully inquiring into the grounds of his apprehension: a sense of danger would make us open to conviction. Let us therefore not be averse to see and acknowledge our guilt before God, lest our conviction of its existence come too late to avert its punishment.]

3. Let your humiliation be candid and complete—

[Saul confessed his sin, but still shewed his hypocrisy by his anxiety to be honoured before men. Hence, though Samuel so far complied as to go with him, and to execute on Agag the judgment that had been denounced, yet he left him immediately afterwards, and never visited him more. Oh, fearful separation! The friend who just before had wept and prayed for him all night, forsook him now for ever. From henceforth Saul was given up to sin and misery, till at last the vengeance of an incensed God came upon him to the uttermost. Would we escape his doom? let our humiliation be deep, and our repentance genuine: let us be willing to take shame to ourselves both before God and man; and be indifferent about the estimation of man, provided we may but obtain the favour of a reconciled God.]

CCC

GOD INSPECTS THE HEART

1 Sam. 16:7. The Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart.

WHAT a solemn and awful declaration is this! how interesting to every one of us! The generality, it is to be feared, scarcely think of themselves as in the presence of God: whereas his eye is immediately upon our hearts, inspecting the very inmost recesses of them, and marking every imagination of them with a view to a future judgment. The admonition, though arising out of particular circumstances, is general, and deserves from every one of us the most attentive consideration. The occasion of it was this. God having determined to reject Saul from being king over Israel, and to place on the throne one who should fulfil all his will, commanded Samuel to take a horn of oil, and to anoint to the kingly office one of the sons of Jesse the Beth-lehemite. Samuel, the more effectually to cloke the real object of his mission, was directed to offer a sacrifice at Beth-lehem, and to invite to it both Jesse and all his sons. Eliab, the eldest of the sons, came first before him; and Samuel concluded, from his portly mien and his majestic stature, that he must be the person whom God had ordained to the office: but God rectified his mistake, and told him, that HE did not form his estimate after the manner of men; for "men regarded only the outward appearance; whereas HE looked on the heart." A similar intimation was given to Samuel in relation to seven of Jesse's sons, who passed before him; in consequence of which, David, the youngest, was sent for, and "was anointed in the midst of his brethren." There was in his heart what God did not see in the heart of any of his brethren. There were in them many external recommendations; but he "was a man after God's own heart:" and to his internal qualities God had respect, in appointing him to the kingdom. Having thus seen the scope of the words as delivered on that particular occasion, we shall proceed to notice,

I. The truth contained in them—

God does inspect the hearts of men—

1. He is qualified to do so—

["He is light; and with him there is no darkness at all." "His eyes are in every place, beholding the evil and the goodb." There is no possibility of going from his presence: "if we ascend to heaven, he is there: if we make our bed in hell, behold, he is there also. If we say the darkness shall cover us, the darkness and the light to him are both alike." "All things are naked and opened before him," just as the sacrifices, when flayed and cut open, were to the inspection of the priest. "Hell and destruction are before him; and much more the hearts of the children of men."]

2. He does so—

["His eyes run to and fro throughout the whole earth." And not only do "his eyes behold, but his eyelids try the children of men;" insomuch that he marks with the utmost precision every imagination of the thoughts of their hearts. And, to preclude all possibility of mistake, he represents himself as "searching the hearts" of men, and trying their reins, yea, as "pondering their hearts," and "weighing their spirits." This, I say, he does: and it is his exclusive prerogative to do so; as Solomon has told us: "Thou, even thou only, knowest the hearts of all the children of men."]

3. He does so with an express reference to a future judgment—

[Having ordained a future judgment for the express purpose of manifesting the justice and equity of his procedure, he notes every thing in the book of his remembrance, and will "bring every secret thing into judgment, whether it be good or evil." There is not a thought or counsel in the heart of any man which he will not then make manifest, in order to pass his judgment upon it. Nay more, as every evil thought brings with it certain consequences, defiling the soul, hardening the heart, grieving the Holy Spirit, and dishonouring God, so he will hold us responsible for these consequences, as well as for the evil from whence they proceed. And of this he has warned us, saying, "I the Lord search the heart; I try the reins, even to give to every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings."]

Such is the truth declared in our text. Let us now mark,

II. Its aspect on our future destinies—

[We have seen that God had respect to the heart of David, when he appointed him to the kingdom. We are not to suppose that David was by nature better than other men: for he himself says, that "he was shapen in iniquity, and that in sin his mother conceived him." Much less are we to imagine that David was justified before God by any righteousness of his own: for St. Paul assures us, that he was justified solely by faith in Christ, whose righteousness was imputed to him without any works of his own. Nor can any of us hope to be exalted to heaven on account of our own superior goodness: for we are all sinners before God; and, if ever we are accepted of him, we must be "accepted in, and through, his beloved" Son, "being found in him, not having our own righteousness, but the righteousness which is of God by faith in him." Nevertheless, though none will possess the kingdom on account of their own righteousness, none will possess it who have not previously been "made meet for it," and are not truly righteous in their own souls.]

This truth being unquestionable, let me now, like Samuel, summon you all to the Sacrifice which is prepared for you in the Gospel; and let me declare which of you God has ordained to the kingdom of heaven.

Who is this that first presents himself before me? He is one possessed of exemplary morality—

[Surely, I say, this is the person whom God has chosen. Behold, how decorous his habit! how amiable his deportment! how unimpeachable his character! Doubtless, I must congratulate you as the happy person to whom I am authorized to declare God's designs of love and mercy.

No, says God: thou hast erred in judgment respecting him: thou admirest him, because of his outward appearance: but I look at the heart: and I command thee to pass him by, because "I have refused him." Blameless as he appears, he is not accepted of me, because he is trusting in his own righteousness, and not in the righteousness of my dear Son. He has "a form of godliness," it is true; but he is destitute of "its power." He is ignorant of his own state before me: he fancies himself "rich, and increased with goods, and in need of nothing; whilst, in reality he is wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." He is lukewarm in all that relates to me; and therefore I lothe him, and shall cast him off with abhorrence. "He draws nigh to me with his lips; but his heart is far from me." I consider him, therefore, as no better than a whited sepulchre, beautiful without, but full of every thing that is offensive within. His self-righteousness and self-complacency render him odious in my sight; and therefore dismiss him: and proceed.]

Whom is it that I behold advancing next? He is the man, no doubt: for he is one that loves the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ—

[I am in no fear of erring now. Behold, thou believest in Christ! Dost thou not? And thou regardest him as "all thy salvation, and all thy desire." Thou art highly valued, too, in the Church of Christ: thou hast more than mere morality: thou "renoucest all confidence in the flesh, and rejoicest in Christ alone," I congratulate—

Pause, saith the Lord: thou art deceived again. This is not the man whom I have chosen. He has embraced the Gospel, it is true: but "his soul is not upright within him." "He has a name to live, but in reality he is deadb." He has come into the fold: but he climbed over the wall; and is therefore, in my estimation, no better than a thief and a robber. He never came in at the strait gate: he was never truly broken-hearted and contrite: he never fled for refuge to the hope that was set before him: he has taken up religion lightly, and he will renounce it lightly: "if tribulation should arise to him on account of the word, he will presently be offended; and in the time of

temptation will fall awayd.” Dismiss him: for “he has not the root of the matter in him;” and therefore is none of mine.]

Now then, I trust, I cannot err: for he whom I now see has long made an honourable and consistent profession of religion—

[I think I have long seen thee a regular attendant on the house and ordinances of God. I have long seen thee a supporter of the Gospel, and a friend of all who profess it. Thou hast withstood many a storm of temptation and persecution; and hast maintained a good profession before many witnesses. Of thee, therefore, I can have no doubt. Draw nigh, and receive the tokens of God’s favourable acceptance.

But what do I see here? What! Lord, am I deceived again? Yes; thou still art attracted too much by the outward appearance. He is not the man whom I have chosen. “He has left his first love:” he is “a backslider in heart,” if not in act; and therefore “shall be filled with his own waysg.” See what a hold the world has upon him; and how all “the seed that has been sown in his heart, is choked, so that he brings forth no fruit to perfection!” He gives me but a divided heart, and therefore cannot be accepted of me. He once embraced my covenant; but “he was not steadfast in it;” “his heart was never right with me:” he never “followed me fully.” He “says he is a Jew; but he lies!” “for he is not a Jew, who is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God.”]

Beloved Brethren, it is not in the power of man to point out, with certainty, which of you shall inherit the kingdom of God. It is probable enough that there is some obscure David, unthought of by man, yet chosen of God, and through grace endued with that integrity of heart, which many, who make a figure before men, are destitute of, and who, though last in man’s esteem, shall be first in God’s.

But, as the event can be determined ultimately by God alone, let me ENTREAT you all,

1. To examine carefully your own hearts—

[This we are commanded to do; and we should do it with all imaginable fidelity and care. We should not, however, rest in our own endeavours, but should “entreat of God to search and try us, and to see whether there be, unperceived by ourselves, any wicked way in us, and to lead us in the way everlasting.” Desperate is “the deceitfulness of the human heart: who can know it?” There are thousands who “think themselves to be something, when they are nothingo.” Remember, I pray you, not to be too confident of your own state: but, after the strictest search, adopt the modest diffidence of St. Paul, and say, “Though I know nothing by myself, yet am I not thereby justified: but He that judgeth me is the Lord.”]

2. To give yourselves unreservedly to God—

[This is the very improvement which David himself, in his dying counsels to Solomon, teaches us to make of this subject: “Thou, Solomon, my son, know thou the God of thy father, and serve him with a perfect heart, and with a willing mind: FOR the Lord searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts.” God “requireth truth in the inward parts:” nor will he accept any, who are not, like Nathanael, “Israelites indeed, and without guile.” Remember, a kingdom is at stake; and not an earthly kingdom, that shall soon pass away, but a kingdom that shall be possessed for ever. Bear in mind, too, that whomsoever you deceive, you cannot deceive God: and that, whatever you may judge respecting yourselves, or others may judge of you, “God’s sentence, and that alone, will stand:” for “not he that commendeth himself shall be approved; but he whom the Lord commendeth.”]

CCCI

DAVID’S VINDICATION OF HIMSELF

1 Sam. 17:29. And David said, What have I now done? Is there not a cause?

IT is impossible for any man so to conduct himself in this world, as to avoid censure: but it is desirable so to act, as not to deserve censure. The rule prescribed for us, in Scripture, is this: “Be ye blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world.” Like our blessed Lord, we must expect to have our words and actions misconstrued by wicked men: but we should labour to be able to say, with him, “Which of you convinceth me of sinb?” The appeal which David makes to his indignant brother, in my text, is precisely that, which, when blamed by any one for an action that has offended him, we should be prepared to make: “What have I now done” that was deserving of blame? or what have I done, which was not called for by the circumstances in which I was placed?

Let me,

I. Unfold to you David’s vindication of himself—Mark,

1. The blame imputed to him—

[He had been sent, by his father, to inquire after the welfare of his brethren; and he had executed his office with all practicable expedition. But, whilst David was conversing with his brethren, Goliath came in front of the Israelitish army, as he had done both morning and evening for forty successive days, to challenge any individual to single combat. David heard his impious defiance, not

of Israel only, but of Israel's God, and was filled with indignation against him: and, having heard what honours Saul had engaged to confer on any one who should encounter this giant, he expressed his willingness to undertake the task, and to risk his own life in defence of his king and country. Not that he conceived himself able to cope with this mighty man: but he knew that God was all-sufficient for those who should trust in him; and he doubted not, but that God would give him the victory over this insulting foe. For this his brother Eliab severely reprov'd him, imputing his professed zeal to pride and vanity, and a desire to see the battle, which was at that very instant about to commence. He reflected on him, too, as having deserted his proper post, and as neglecting his proper duty; though he knew the end for which he had come thither, and by whom he had been sent.]

2. His vindication of himself—

[Lovely was the spirit of David on this occasion. He did not “render evil for evil, and railing for railing;” but, with meekness and modesty, and yet with a firmness expressive of conscious innocence, he appealed to all around him: “What have I now done? Is there not a cause?” Have I manifested a grief of heart that my nation should be so insulted, and an indignation of mind that Jehovah himself should be thus defied? Have I expressed a willingness to expose my life in the service of my king, my country, and my God; and is evil to be imputed to me for this? Is there any thing in this deserving of blame? Besides, “Is there not a cause” for what I have said and done? Does not the insolence of this haughty champion call for it? Does not the dispirited state of my own countrymen require it? Does not, also, the honour of my God demand it? And is there any time to be lost? In the space of another hour this gigantic foe may be out of reach; or the battle may have begun; and the time for honouring my God, and benefiting my country, may be for ever lost? Why, then, am I to have all manner of evil imputed to me, for that which is in itself most commendable, and which the occasion so imperatively demands?]

David being undoubtedly an example to us in this matter, I shall,

II. Take occasion from it to vindicate those who stand forth as champions in the Christian cause—

They, in their place, must expect to incur censure from an ungodly world—

[Their conduct will be condemned, as unbecoming in persons of their age and station: it will be traced also to pride, and conceit, and vanity, as its real source: and it will be represented as an occasion and a plea for neglecting their proper business in life. The Christian that will serve his Lord and Master with fidelity, shall be sure to meet with some measure of the treatment to which the Saviour himself was subjected: “If they call the Master of the house Beelzebub,” let not those of his household hope that they shall be suffered to escape reproach. Even the friends and relatives of a Christian, and especially if he be young, will be among the first to vent their indignation against him: Why should he be singular, and venture to adopt a conduct not sanctioned by his superiors? Why should he, by his indiscreet forwardness, cast a reflection upon all his brethren as wanting in zeal? Why does he not content himself with discharging his own proper duties, without interfering in matters that are too high for him? What can actuate him in all this, but a vain desire of distinction, or an hypocritical pretension to qualities which he does not possess? In this way shall not his actions only, but his motives also, be judged by those who have not the courage or the piety to follow his example.]

But the faithful Christian may adopt the very appeal which David made to those who censured him—

[“What have I now done,” that calls for this reproof? to be condemned for manifesting a love to God, and a desire to wipe away the reproach that is cast on Israel? When I see the great adversary of God and man exulting in his might, and putting to flight all the armies of Israel, is it wrong in me to enter the lists against him, and to enroll myself as a soldier of Jesus Christ, to maintain his cause? What, if I be weak and incompetent to the task, is it any evil to confide in God, and to believe that he will “perfect his strength in my weakness?” Methinks, in an undertaking like this, I should meet with encouragement rather than reproof: for in all that I do, in fighting the Lord's battles, I do only what is the duty of every living man, whether he be old or young, and whether he be rich or poor. I ask too, “Is there not a cause” for all that I have done? Does not the great enemy of God and man carry, as it were, all before him? Is there not a want of bold and intrepid soldiers to face him? Do not even the armies of God's Israel need to be encouraged by some bright example? Does not the king of Israel, by “exceeding great and precious promises,” call us to the conflict? and will not the honour that he will award to us be a rich recompence for our utmost exertions? As for David, he might have been preserved, though all his brethren had perished: but who shall live, if he forbear to fight the good fight of faith? Surely, if God's honour be impugned; if his enemies triumph; if we, in our very baptism, engaged ourselves to be soldiers of Jesus Christ, and to fight under his banners; if there be no safety for us but in fighting; and if eternal happiness depend on our maintaining the conflict till we have gained the victory; then “is there a cause” for our most strenuous efforts; and all blame must attach, not to us, who fight, but to those who decline, and discountenance, the combat.]

APPLICATION—

1. Let none be discouraged from engaging in the service of Christ—

[You must expect to “endure hardness, as good soldiers of Jesus Christ,” and that your greatest foes will be those of your own household. You know that a martial spirit is infused with care into the minds of those who enlist into the armies of an earthly prince: and shall not the same pervade those who have undertaken to fight the Lord's battles? I say then to all of you, Offer yourselves as volunteers in His service: fear no danger to which you may be exposed: and rely altogether upon Him who has called you to this warfare. “Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might:” and fear not but that you shall be “more than conquerors, through Him

who loved you.”]

2. In maintaining your steadfastness, look well to your own spirit—

[Persons do harm when they vindicate themselves in an unbecoming temper and spirit. We are to “instruct in meekness them that oppose themselves.” “A soft answer turneth away wrath:” and “he who ruleth well his own spirit, is greater than he who taketh a citye.” It is impossible not to admire the spirit of David on this occasion: let it be transfused into your minds; and, “instead of being overcome of evil, learn, under the most trying circumstances, to overcome evil with good.”]

CCCII

DAVID AND GOLIATH

1 Sam. 17:45, 46. Then said David to the Philistine, Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom thou hast defied. This day will the Lord deliver thee into mine hand.

THAT God acts in a sovereign way in the distribution of his favours is a truth to which proud man is very averse: yet does it meet us in every part of the Holy Scriptures. We have seen it in the elevation of Saul to the regal office: it appears also in the selection of David, whom Samuel was ordered to anoint as successor to the throne. We behold it now again in raising up David, whilst yet a youth untrained to war, to slay Goliath, from whom all the army of Israel fled. It might rather have been expected that Jonathan, who had already shewn a most extraordinary valour, should stand forth as a champion on this occasion; or at least that some valiant man should have been found in the camp to espouse his country’s cause: but God had ordained that David should possess the throne of Saul; and by this means he began to educate, as it were, the youth for his destined office.

In the words before us we have David’s address to his antagonist just on the commencement of his engagement with him: and from them we shall be led to notice,

I. The character of the combatants—

In Goliath we behold a proud, self-confident blasphemer—

[He was of gigantic stature, (above eleven feet in height, or, at the lowest possible computation, ten,) and possessed strength in proportion to his size. His armour was such as would have almost borne down a man of moderate strength: and, clad in this, he deemed himself invulnerable and irresistible. Hence, whilst he stalked in proud defiance between the two hostile armies, he, in mind and spirit, presumed to defy even God himself.

Characters of this description are by no means uncommon in the world: for, though we behold not in these days men of such extraordinary bulk, we behold the same pride of heart in multitudes around us, who, glorying in their own bodily or intellectual powers, use them only as instruments of aggrandizing themselves, and of insulting God.]

David, on the contrary, was humbly dependent on God alone—

[Being sent by his father to visit his brethren, he came to them in the ranks just at the time that this proud blasphemer was challenging the hosts of Israel. Filled with indignation at his impiety, and desirous to vindicate the honour of his God, he manifested a wish to accept the challenge: and, when reproved by his eldest brother, he meekly but firmly persisted in his purpose, saying, “What have I now done? Is there not a cause?”

On being brought to Saul, and warned of his incompetency to contend with such a mighty and experienced warrior, he shewed at once what his true motives were, and in whom his confidence was placed. He had before experienced the protection of Heaven, in two conflicts with a lion and a bear, which he had slain, when they rose up against him; and he doubted not but that God would crown him with similar success in his conflict with this uncircumcised Philistine.

Saul would have lent him his own armour for the combat: but David found it only an encumbrance; and therefore went forth unarmed, except with a sling, and five stones in his shepherd’s bag, confiding, not in any human means, but in the strength of the living God. Hence when Goliath scorned his youthful appearance, and derided his preparations for the conflict, David replied in the words of our text, “Thou comest to me with a sword, and with a spear, and with a shield: but I come to thee in the name of the Lord of hosts.”

How striking was this contrast! how exemplary the conduct of David! and how illustrative of the spirit in which the true Christian goes forth against his spiritual enemies, and prepares to combat the world, the flesh, and the devil!]

The close of our text leads us to notice,

II. The issue of the conflict—

According to all human expectations it must be decided in favour of Goliath—

[There was, as it should appear, no room for competition between the combatants; the one a youth, a shepherd, unused to war, and destitute, as we may say, either of defensive or offensive armour; and the other, a man of immense strength, trained to war from his

very youth, and armed with all that the ingenuity of man could furnish: his armour altogether impenetrable to the stones, with which alone the youth was prepared to oppose him.]

But his strength was weakness, when opposed to the God of Israel—

[The first stone which David cast at him, was directed by an unerring arm, and an almighty power: it pierced the forehead of Goliath, and in a moment realized the youth's prediction. Thus was the proud boaster "delivered into David's hand;" and David, unprovided with any sword of his own, took the sword of his adversary, and with it cut off his head. And no sooner did the Philistines behold their champion dead, than they fled from Israel with terror, and yielded themselves an easy prey to their pursuers.]

We forbear to suggest the various reflections naturally arising in the mind from this event, because God himself has told us,

III. The design of the dispensation—

It was intended,

1. For the instruction of the world—

[Men in general think but little of God; and because they do not see him, they are ready to suppose that he does not interfere in the affairs of men. They imagine that they may set at nought his authority, and pour contempt on his people, with impunity: and, if left, like Goliath, to prosper for a season, their presumption is proportionally increased. But God is no unconcerned spectator of his creatures' conduct: he marks down every thing in the book of his remembrance; and will vindicate his own honour at the appointed season; perhaps in that moment, when his adversary conceives himself most secure.

Think of this, ye who abuse your strength to the purposes of criminal indulgence, and who vaunt of your excesses in wine or debauchery of any kind. Think of this also, ye who oppose and deride religion. Remember whom it is that you are insulting. Goliath thought that he was defying Israel; but his defiance was in reality hurled against Jehovah himself. So you, though probably unconscious of it, are in reality fighting against God himself. And "will you continue to provoke HIM to jealousy? Are you stronger than HE?" "Will you be strong in the day that he shall deal with you? or will you thunder with a voice like his?" Ah, cease from this mad warfare, and cast down the weapons of your rebellion, and humble yourselves, while yet the sword of vengeance is unsheathed. Behold Goliath prostrate on the ground, a monument of human folly, and human weakness! Behold him placed for a monument to all succeeding ages, that "God resisteth the proud;" and that "him who walks in pride, He is able to abase!" God delivered him into David's hand on purpose that "all the earth might know that there is a God in Israel.]"

2. For the consolation of God's Israel—

[Great and mighty are the enemies of God's people; and most unequal is the contest in which they are engaged. They may well say, "We have no power or might against this great company that cometh against us." But in this dispensation God has especially provided for their encouragement: he gave success to David, that "all the assembly of his people might know, that the Lord saveth not with sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's." In HIM must be our trust: in his strength must we go forth against our enemies: we must "be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might." We must arm ourselves with the weapons which he has provided; and though they appear to the eye of sense to be as useless as a sling and stone, yet shall they be made effectual through his power. Let us "take hope as our helmet, righteousness as our breast-plate, truth for our girdle, the Gospel of peace for our greaves, faith for our shield, and the word of God for our sword," and we need not fear either men or devils; for "He that is in us, is greater than he that is in the world," and "we shall be made more than conquerors through Him that loved us." Gird yourselves then to the battle, expecting "God to perfect his own strength in your weakness." Whoever, whether of friends or enemies, may attempt to divert you from your purpose, go forward: and remember, that as the eyes of both the hostile armies were fixed on David and Goliath, so is there "a cloud of witnesses" anxiously observing you. O, "quit yourselves like men," and soon you shall have cause to say, "Thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!]"

CCCIII

SAUL'S ENVY OF DAVID

1 Sam. 18:9. And Saul eyed David from that day and forward.

THERE is not a baser principle in the human heart than envy. If we notice the connexion in which it is usually mentioned in the Scriptures, we shall see at once what an hateful disposition it is. St. Paul, speaking of the state of mankind by nature, says, they are "full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity:" and again, shewing what may be the state even of the Christian world, when distracted by contentions and disputes, he says, "lest there be debates, envyings, wraths, strifes, backbitings, whisperings, swellings, tumults." In these two passages we behold it drawn to the very life; in the one, as restrained within certain limits by the mounds of a religious profession; and in the other, as breaking down every restraint, and inundating the whole man. For an illustration of it in all its most odious characters, we need look no further than to the passage before us; where Saul is represented as giving himself up entirely to its dominion. In order to set it before you in its true colours, we shall consider,

I. Its grounds—

[Envy is a grudging to another the possession of some good, which we ourselves affect: I say, of some good; for no man wishes evil to himself: the object therefore that excites the passion of envy must be good. It need not indeed be really and intrinsically good; it is sufficient if it be good in the estimation of the person who beholds it. In Saul, envy was excited by the praises which were bestowed on David on account of his success against Goliath: the women, whose office it was to celebrate great actions with songs and music, ascribed to David the honour of slaying myriads of his enemies, whilst they spoke of Saul as slaying only thousands. This mark of distinction was painful to the proud heart of Saul, who could not endure that another should be honoured above himself. It is precisely in the same way that envy is called forth by distinctions of every kind. Any endowments, whether natural or acquired, are sufficient to provoke this passion in the breasts of men. Beauty, courage, genius, though they be the gifts of nature, and therefore not any grounds of glorying to the persons who possess them, are yet greatly envied by those who wish to be admired for those qualities. In like manner, the attainments acquired by skill and diligence, together with the wealth or honour consequent upon those attainments, are objects which universally inflame this malignant passion. It must be observed, however, that this passion is called forth only where some degree of rivalry exists. A physician does not envy the triumphs of a warrior, or the success of a great lawyer; nor do they, on the other hand, envy his advancement to the summit of his profession: it is in their own line only, and towards those with whom there exists some kind of competition, that these feelings are excited: and it is by watching the motions of our hearts in reference to persons so circumstanced, that we shall detect the workings of this passion within us.

This passion may exist, not in individuals only, but in bodies of men; as, for instance, in schools, or colleges, or universities, or kingdoms: for, as every one may be said to possess a share of that honour which belongs to his own peculiar party, every one must feel an interest in exalting that party, and a proportionable degree of pain when its honours are eclipsed.

Strange as it may appear, religion itself may be made an occasion of bringing into exercise this vile passion: for though no envious person can delight in piety on its own account, he may desire the reputation attached to it, and consequently may envy him who really possesses it. What was it but Abel's superior piety, and the tokens of God's favour vouchsafed to him, that instigated Cain to imbrue his hands in his blood? We are expressly told also, in the history before us, that when Saul saw that David behaved himself very wisely, and that God was with him, he feared and hated him the more. And why was the Apostle Paul so hated and persecuted, not only by the avowed enemies of Christianity, but by many also who professed to reverence the Christian name? Was it not that his light shone more bright than that of others; and that the success of his labours was proportionably increased? Yes; it was owing to this that the Jews were filled with envy, when they saw the multitudes which sought to avail themselves of his instructions; and that less popular ministers in the Christian Church laboured to undermine his influence, "preaching Christ even of envy and strife," that by so doing they might draw over to themselves his converts, and so "add affliction to his bonds."]

Having seen the grounds from whence it springs, let us next consider,

II. Its operations—

[In the history before us, as contained in this and the two following chapters, we behold this passion in as strong a point of view as it can well be placed. From the moment that Saul became enslaved by it, he was so blinded as not to behold the excellence of David's character; so hardened as to be insensible to all the obligations which he, and the whole nation, owed to him: and so infatuated, as to seek incessantly his death. Repeatedly did he endeavour to destroy David with his spear. When he had failed in these attempts, he sought to ensnare David by engaging him to marry his eldest daughter, and then giving her to another; and afterwards by inducing him to expose his life to the sword of the Philistines in order to obtain his younger daughter in marriage. When he was disappointed in this also, he issued an order to Jonathan and to all his sons to kill David: and, when convinced of the injustice of this command, and pledged in a solemn oath to recede from his wicked purpose, he again renewed his attempts to murder him; and sought to gratify himself with seeing the murder effected, if not of perpetrating it with his own hand: and, when he did not succeed in that, he still pursued the fugitive to Naioth, where Samuel dwelt, sending different messengers, and at last going himself, to apprehend him; and even attempting to destroy Jonathan himself for pleading his cause.

Now we grant that such effects as these are very rare; for, in truth, very few have it in their power to pursue the object of their envy with such murderous and unrelenting rancour as Saul. But the tendency of this passion is the same in all: it produces in all a permanent aversion to the person, so that the very sight of him is painful, and occasions a desire, if possible, to bring him down to a level with ourselves. Like Said, "we shall eye him from that day, and forward." His worth and excellence will be so far from pacifying our wrath, that it will rather augment it; and the brighter his character shines, the more shall we be offended at it. "Envy is" justly said to be "as rottenness in the bones:" the disease lies deep; it creates uneasy sensations throughout the whole man; and is out of the reach of any common remedy. Though it may not operate so powerfully as to excite a desire to kill him that is the object of it, yet it invariably so affects the mind as to dispose us to detract from his merits, and to rejoice in his misfortunes. Nay more, we shall be ready, if not by overt act, yet at least by secret connivance, so to lower him in the estimation of others, as to prepare the way for the more easy exercise of their hostility towards him: and then shall rejoice in his fall, pleasing ourselves that it has been accomplished without any intervention on our part: and, if he be removed by death itself, it will excite the feeling of satisfaction rather than of pain and grief.

Well is this represented by Solomon as one of the greatest evils upon earth, and as stamping "vanity and vexation of spirit" upon all things here below, that "for a good work a man is envied of his neighbour." For, however "cruel and outrageous wrath" may be, it

may be withstood; but “who,” says Solomon, “can stand before envyh?”]

Happy shall we be if, by any prescriptions we may offer, we may be enabled in any degree to promote,

III. Its cure—

No conduct on the part of those who are the objects of it can eradicate envy from the hearts of others. They may indeed put a veil, as it were, over their own virtues, so as to give less occasion for the exercise of envy; but nothing that they can do can prevent the disposition from being cherished by those around them. But we may all impede its influence over our own hearts;

1. By contemplating the vanity of earthly distinctions—

[How poor and empty are those vanities which men so greatly affect! The satisfaction arising from wealth or honour is far less than people generally imagine. Only let us reflect with what difficulty honours are obtained; with what pain and trouble they are often accompanied; how easily they are blasted; how little they can do for us under pain or sickness; and how soon they are terminated by death; and we shall see that they are unworthy the anxiety with which they are sought, or the regret with which they are lost. From such a view of them David exhorts us to look with indifference on the advancement of others, and to content ourselves with the pursuit of honours that shall never fade, and of happiness that shall never disappoint our most sanguine expectations——]

2. By cultivating the knowledge of our own hearts—

[If we envy others, it is from an idea that we ourselves deserve the honour that is conferred on them. But, if we knew the extent of our own demerit, as we are viewed by an holy God, we should rather account the lowest possible degree of honour above our desert; yea, we should rather be filled with wonder and with gratitude, that we are not held up as objects of execration and abhorrence. This would lead us willingly to “take the lowest place;” and consequently would lay the axe to the root of that accursed principle, which makes the elevation of others a ground of our own disquiet——]

3. By seeking a thorough conversion unto God—

[This alone will be attended with complete success. When the heart itself is renewed after the divine image, these hateful qualities will be banished from it. Hence this is the prescription which the inspired writers give for the first removal of the disorder, and for the subsequent prevention of its return!.]

ADDRESS,

1. Those who indulge this malignant spirit—

[The natural man is universally in a greater or less degree under its influence: and, though lightly considered by the world at large, it is an evil which will exclude from heaven every person that is under its dominion. O that the guilt and danger of it were more generally and more deeply considered!

But experience proves that even professors of religion may in a very awful degree be led captive by it. What shall we say of such? what, but that “they are carnal, and walk as men?” Whence is it that so many dissensions and disputes arise in the Church of God, and are often carried to such a fearful extent? Is there nothing of this principle at work? Is not this “the root of bitterness that springs up and defiles them?” Yes: St. James gives us the true account, both of the principle itself, and of its operation in the Church: he tells us also, what will be the bitter consequence of yielding to its influence. Let those who pretend to piety, look well to their own hearts, and tremble lest, while their “voice is Jacob’s voice, their hands be the hands of Esau.” The true line of conduct for a Christian is that of Jonathan; who, knowing that he should be eclipsed by David, yet sought by all possible means to protect his person and advance his interests. Let Jonathan’s character, as here portrayed, be contrasted with that of Saul, and be ever before our eyes for daily imitation——]

2. Those who are the objects of it—

[Marvel not, ye holy and circumspect Christians, if your characters be traduced by envy and detraction. “They that render evil for good will be against you, because you follow the thing that good is.” You must not expect to be treated better than your Lord and Master was. But study the character of David: see how meekly he bore his injuries: see how studiously he rendered good for evil: see how he “walked wisely before God in a perfect way.” This is a conduct worthy to be followed, and shall assuredly bring with it an abundant recompence.]

CCCIV

DAVID’S FEAR OF SAUL

1 Sam. 20:3. Truly as the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, there is but a step between me and death.

IT is justly said, that “oppression maketh a wise man mad.” One there was, who endured it in every form, and to its utmost possible extent; and yet never uttered an unadvised word, or betrayed a temper which his bitterest enemies could condemn: Jesus, after

years of persecution, could give this challenge to his enemies, "Which of you convinceth me of sin?" But fallen man, however upheld for a season, has generally betrayed his weakness when his trials have been heavy and of long continuance. We admire the conduct of David in many respects, and think him on the whole a very exalted character; but yet, on some occasions he fainted, and yielded to unworthy apprehensions respecting the final issue of his troubles. Such was the state of his mind when he uttered the words which we have just read; and which, though containing a general and acknowledged truth, were not such as he would have uttered, if he had not given way to desponding fears.

We shall consider the words in this two-fold view;

I. As a general and acknowledged truth—

The general representations which are given of life in the Scriptures, strongly mark its shortness and uncertainty—

[It is light, and unsubstantial in itself as "a vapour:" its length is but as "an hand-breadth:" the rapidity with which it passeth away is compared to "a post," in which the utmost possible despatch is used; or to "an eagle hasting to its prey." Such is its extreme vanity, that it is like "a dreame" or "a shadow:" and so short does the whole of it in a retrospect appear, that it is "but as yesterday when it is past." How justly then may it be said, that there is but a step between us and death!]

It must be regarded in that light by all persons without exception—

[Age or sickness may give some additional force to the expression in our text; but neither the youngest nor the most vigorous has any more certainty of life than the feeblest of mankind. Disease or accident may assault one as well as another; so that none can "boast of to-morrow; for we know not what a day may bring forth." So numerous indeed are the instances of persons removed suddenly, or in the very midst of life, that we cannot but acknowledge the truth and awfulness of the declaration before us.]

But, to obtain a just view of our text, we must regard it,

II. As an assertion arising out of the peculiar circumstances of David at that time—

[In this view it was the dictate of unbelief. We blame not David for using with all diligence the means of safety: for if he had neglected to use all just precautions under an expectation that God would fulfil his word at all events, he would have tempted God; just as our Saviour would have tempted him, if he had cast himself from the pinnacle of the temple, But when God had assured him that he should possess the throne of Israel, and had actually confirmed the appointment by a sacred unction, it became David to give credit to the word of God, and to rest assured, that neither men nor devils should eventually disannul it. There was indeed such malignity in the heart of Saul, that nothing but Omnipotence could prevent the execution of his plots against David: but David should have known that "there is no might or power against the Lord," and that "the counsel of the Lord shall surely stand:" and in the confidence of this, he should have been satisfied that Saul could not prevail against him. However just therefore his expressions were as applied to men in general, we cannot approve of them as applied to his own case: he should not have said, "I shall one day perish by the hand of Saul," but rather, "Since God is for me, who can be against me?"]

Having thus obtained a just and accurate view of the words before us, we may enter more largely into THE IMPROVEMENT which should be made of them. We may notice from them,

1. How frail the best of men are, when brought into heavy trials—

[On the whole, David's faith was remarkably strong: but here it failed; and, if it had not been strengthened from above, he would utterly have fainted. This he himself acknowledges, after he had recovered from this momentary depression. It has justly been observed, that all the most eminent saints in Scripture have failed in that very grace for which they were most renowned: Abraham, the great pattern and example of faith, repeatedly denied his wife through unbelief: Moses, the meekest of the human race, "spake unadvisedly with his lips:" and Job, whose patience is proverbial, "cursed the day of his birth." Thus all have been left to shew, that their strength was not in themselves; that, if left, they were weak as other men; and that it is in God only that any just confidence can be placed: "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool."

Let us bear this in mind, both for our humiliation and our encouragement. If we have been enabled to maintain a holy and consistent conduct, let us remember that it is "by the grace of God we are what we are;" and if we are tempted to look up to the saints of old as soaring to heights that can never be attained by us, let us remember, that the grace which wrought effectually for them, is equally sufficient for us; and that "we also can do all things through Christ strengthening us."]

2. What is the proper use and office of faith—

[Faith is not to supersede, but to encourage, our own endeavours, and to assure us of our successful termination of them. When to human appearance the difficulties are insurmountable, then is the season for faith to shew itself, and "against hope to believe in hope." This was the operation of Abraham's faith: he considered not the age of himself or of his wife, which precluded all hope of issue in the natural way, but expected that God would effect by miracle what could be effected in no other way. Doubting neither the power nor the veracity of God, he was willing to wait God's time, and confident that he should not be disappointed of his hope. Had David's faith wrought thus on this occasion, it would have borne him up amidst the waves of trouble that rolled over him in quick succession.

This then is what we recommend to all. Are you bowed down with a sense of guilt? Lay hold on that promise, that "Christ will in no wise cast out any who come unto him." Are you assaulted with grievous temptations? Remember who has said, that "you shall not be

tempted above that ye are able, but that you shall have a way to escape, or be enabled to bear it." Do your corruptions appear invincible? Rely on him who has said, "My grace is sufficient for you." And, if your troubles are of such a magnitude as to menace your immediate destruction, rest yourselves on the promise of Jehovah, that "all things shall work together for your good." Be satisfied that "He is faithful who hath promised," and that "not a jot or tittle of his word can fail.]"

3. What is the wisdom of every child of man—

[None of us have any such warrant to expect a continuance of life as David had; and therefore his observation respecting the shortness and uncertainty of life should be admitted in its utmost force. Ignorant then as we are whether the very next step may not carry us into the eternal world, we ought to inquire with ourselves, Whether it would take us to heaven or to hell? O what a thought is this! What madness is it not to dwell upon it more than we do, or to delay for a moment our preparation for the eternal state! We would call on all of you; the aged, who know for a certainty that their time cannot be long; the sick, who are warned by the disorders that are yet upon them; the young, who are in the prime and vigour of life; we would entreat all without exception to stand ready for death and judgment. O beloved, "prepare to meet your God." Think of the multitudes that have been summoned to his tribunal unprepared; and be thankful that there is yet one step between you and death. The Lord grant that, whenever that step be taken, you may have an abundant entrance into the realms of bliss!]

CCCV

DAVID'S FORBEARANCE TOWARDS SAUL

1 Sam. 24:4–6. And the men of David said unto him, Behold the day of which the Lord said unto thee, Behold, I will deliver thine enemy into thine hand, that thou mayest do to him as it shall seem good unto thee. Then David arose, and cut off the skirt of Saul's robe privily. And it came to pass afterward, that David's heart smote him, because he had cut off Saul's skirt. And he said unto his men, The Lord forbid that I should do this thing unto my master, the Lord's anointed, to stretch forth mine hand against him, seeing he is the anointed of the Lord.

KNOWING what we do of the depravity of human nature, we should scarcely conceive that men could attain to such heights of virtue as are recorded in the Holy Scriptures, if we did not know that those records are of divine authority. This observation is verified in the history of Abraham, of Moses, and of David also, who, though a very faulty character in some respects, was in other respects a star of the first magnitude. We are called on the present occasion to notice his conduct towards Saul; and to consider him under a three-fold relation;

I. As a subject towards his prince—

[Never had man more just occasion to withstand his prince than he: the inveteracy with which Saul laboured to destroy him was incessant——Yet how did David act towards him? God had now placed Saul within his power; (for Saul lay down to sleep in a cave where David and his men were concealed:) but David would not touch him: yea, though importuned by his own men, and urged to consider Saul's exposed situation as an indication of the divine pleasure, he not only would not smite Saul with his own hand, but would not suffer any one else to smite him: and even when, for the fuller discovery of his own innocence, he had cut off the skirt of Saul's robe, his conscience smote him as having offered an indignity to his sovereign: so tenderly did he regard not only the life, but the honour also, of his prince.

In this he was a pattern to all succeeding ages: for though the different governments of the world give different degrees of power to the supreme magistrate, and of liberty to the subjects, yet in every country under heaven must the magistrate be considered as God's representative on earth, and must be "obeyed, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake"——Under circumstances of an unfavourable nature, there should be a readiness in us to palliate, rather than to expose and aggravate, his misconduct; and a willingness rather to submit to evils, than by violent resistance to endanger the welfare of the community. The character of Christian subjects is, that they are "the quiet in the land.]"

II. As a saint towards his oppressor—

[The injuries done to David were really "for righteousness' sake." Like Jesus, of whom he was an eminent type, "he was hated without a cause." This consideration must have added ten-fold poignancy to all his afflictions. To be conscious that he was continually labouring to cut off all occasion of offence, and yet to find himself persecuted with unrelenting fury, was most distressing to his mind. Yet, as Saul himself confessed, he returned nothing but good for evil.

But such is the true line of every Christian's duty. We should "not render evil for evil to any man," but rather love our enemies, and do them good. This is the true way to soften the hearts of our enemies, and to ensure a final victory over them——]

III. As a believer towards his God—

[As to avenging himself, David knew that God was the Judge of all, and would in due time vindicate his righteous cause, and punish his unrighteous oppressor: to God therefore he left what belonged to God alone. Moreover, though God had promised him the

kingdom, he left God to fulfil his promise in his own time and way. Doubtless he felt great distress of mind under all his trials; but he committed himself to God in prayer, and looked for deliverance from him alone.

Thus, however great and complicated our trials be, we should take no hasty step, but “commit ourselves to God as a faithful Creator,” and expect assuredly the final accomplishment of all his promises——]

CCCVI

DAVID KEPT FROM AVENGING HIMSELF ON NABAL

1 Sam. 25:32, 33. And David said to Abigail, Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, which sent thee this day to meet me: and blessed be thy advice, and blessed be thou, which hast kept me this day from coming to shed blood, and from avenging myself with mine own hand.

THE fidelity of the sacred historians is observable in every part of the divine records. A partial friend, or a person who was unduly concerned about the honour of religion, would have cast a veil over the facts which are contained in this chapter. They are, it must be confessed, extremely humiliating, and constrain us to exclaim, “Lord, what is man!” In the general we behold “the man after God’s heart” acting with a holy consistency, and meriting the character of a most exalted saint: but here we see him rushing to commit the most horrid iniquities, and restrained only by the special intervention of God’s providence.

In contemplating the history before us, we shall see,

I. What evils men would commit if left to themselves—

We wonder not at the churlishness of Nabal: such characters are common; men, who, in point of temper, are “such sons of Belial, that a man cannot even speak to them;” and whose every act constrains you to associate with their names the idea of folly. They are worthless in themselves, yet contemptuous towards others: they are profuse and intemperate in convivial entertainments, but hard-hearted and niggardly in reference to the indigent and distressed. But,

We are amazed at the cruel resentment of David—

[The provocation which he had received was certainly great. He had been the greatest benefactor to his country. He was persecuted only for righteousness’ sake. Though driven to great straits, he had never suffered his soldiers to relieve his wants by plunder. He had afforded a protection to Nabal’s property and servants, without any remuneration whatever. He was peculiarly in want of necessary provisions at this time: and from the preparations which Nabal had made for his feast he might have been supplied without any material inconvenience. His message to Nabal was most courteous and kind: yet was Nabal’s answer insolent in the extreme.

This however did not justify such fierce resentment as David manifested. He might justly have complained of Nabal; perhaps in his circumstances he might have been justified in demanding as a right what had been refused him as a gift: but to think of murdering Nabal, of murdering also every male belonging to him, was as atrocious a design as ever entered into the heart of man. Who would have conceived that such a thought should ever enter into the mind of him, who had so recently spared his most malignant enemy, and had been condemned in his own conscience for even cutting off the skirt of his master’s garment?]

It shews however what corruption there is in the human heart—

[Truly the heart of man is “desperately wicked.” Even though renewed by divine grace, we are no longer able to stand, than whilst we are upheld by God himself. However long we may have persevered in holy obedience, we are yet liable to fall; and however great the temptations which we have withstood in times past, we have no security but that we may be overcome by the smallest. Yea, there is nothing so vile, but we may be led to commit it, if we be not every moment strengthened from on high. Who can contemplate the fall of Noah after his deliverance from the Deluge, and of Lot after his exemplary piety in Sodom, and not tremble for himself, lest he be overcome in an unguarded hour? “Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall.”]

The subject further leads us to notice,

II. How much we owe to God for his providential restraints—

David expresses his obligations to God for delivering him from this temptation—

[A servant of Nabal, fearing the effects of his master’s message, informed his mistress of the whole transaction; bearing testimony at the same time to the kindness and integrity of David’s conduct: and Abigail immediately adopted the most prudent methods of pacifying David’s resentment. Without loss of time she took a liberal portion of the provisions that had been prepared for the feast, and went with them herself to meet David. Happily she met David in the way; and by her consummate address completely disarmed his wrath, and averted the calamity which would have speedily ruined her whole family. Instantly David recognized in her the divine interposition; and, whilst he blessed her for her advice, he blessed God for sending her to obstruct his bloody and vindictive purposes. It is worthy of observation, that David took scarce any notice of her liberality which supplied his present wants, but fixed his whole attention on the deliverance which he had experienced from his own relentless fury: and well might he bless God for that interposition, whereby he was preserved from the blackest crime he could have perpetrated, and possibly too from the penal

consequences of it to all eternity.]

And have not we also reason to adore our God for similar restraints?

[Let us reflect on our past experience, even in relation to revenge. Have we never had our minds so irritated and inflamed, as to feel a readiness to avenge ourselves? And are we sure, that if a murderous instrument had been at hand, we should not have used it? Have not others yielded to that temptation, who were to all appearance as little exposed to it as we: and can we be certain that a little further provocation would not have produced the same effect on us?

But let us inquire also in reference to other sins. Have criminal desires never risen so strong in our hearts, that we have owed it rather to some providential restraints, than to our own abhorrence of iniquity, that they were not actually fulfilled? We have witnessed often enough the falls of others: and to whom must we ascribe it if we ourselves have not fallen in like manner? Must we not say with the prophet, "Thou, Lord, hast wrought all our works in us?" Truly, if we would call to mind the various temptations which we have at any time experienced, and the various methods which God has used for our deliverance, we should behold such evidences of his paternal care, as would fill our hearts with wonder, and our mouths with praise.]

Such are the reflections arising from a general view of our subject. From a more particular inspection of it we may LEARN,

1. What a dreadful evil is revenge—

[There is nothing so cruel, but a vindictive spirit will impel us to it. Whilst under the influence of revenge, we overlook all consequences: we think nothing of the misery which we may entail on persons that are innocent. David was not content with murdering Nabal, but would murder also every male belonging to him, though not one of them was a partaker of Nabal's fault. Thus the incendiary, or the duellist, contemplates not for a moment the miseries he may inflict on others; the welfare of a whole nation would be of no account in his eyes, when compared with the gratification of his revenge. O let us guard against the first risings of this malignant passion! let us bear in mind, that vengeance is not our prerogative, but God's: and let us seek rather that noblest of all victories, "the overcoming of evil with goodg."]

2. What a blessing is a faithful monitor—

[David could scarcely express the obligation he felt to Abigail for her heavenly counsel. And what reason have we to be thankful for the instructions of our parents, the counsels of our friends, and the admonitions of our ministers! We shall never know from what evils we have been preserved by them, till the whole book of God's remembrance shall be opened to us. In the same light we may view those various circumstances of our life which may have appeared most calamitous. The loss of our health or property may have been thought afflictive at the time; but who can tell what he might have perpetrated, if these messengers of mercy had not been sent to arrest him in his course? Let us then receive as from the Lord all those persons or events, which may lead us to reflection. Let us in particular be thankful for reproof; and bear in mind, that almost any other person is a more competent judge of the propriety of our conduct, than we ourselves can be under the impulse of any strong passion. If our friend possess the wisdom and address of Abigail, let us value him the more; but, if not, let his advice be nevertheless welcome to our mind; and let him be highly esteemed by us in proportion to his fidelity.]

3. What need have we all to pray against temptation—

[We may, like David, have withstood the greatest trials, and yet fall, like him, by those which are comparatively light. We are far from being at all times alike. We have not a stock of grace at our own command: it is not the light of one hour, or of one minute, that will suffice for the next; nor is it any measure of grace already received, that will enable us to stand fast in the Lord. We must receive fresh communications every moment, and look continually to the Lord for guidance and support. Let us then beg of God to "hedge up our way with thorns;" and, if preserved by him from falling, let us acknowledge him as the only source of our stability.]

CCCVII

THE UNBELIEVING FEARS OF DAVID

1 Sam. 27:1, And David said in his heart, I shall now perish one day by the hand of Saul.

OF the dispositions of men their fellow-creatures can judge only by external signs, either in word or deed: but God discerns them as they exist in the inmost recesses of the heart, and puts a just construction upon every motion there. It does not appear that David had disclosed to any one his feelings on the occasion before us: but the all-seeing God has told us what was the language of his heart: "David said in his heart, I shall now perish one day by the hand of Saul."

It will be a profitable subject for our consideration, if we inquire,

I. In what light we should regard these fears of David—

Beyond all doubt, there was great occasion for fear—

[The malignity of Saul against him was deeply noted. From the moment that Saul heard persons celebrating the slaughter of ten

thousands by David, whilst they ascribed the slaughter of only thousands to him, he “eyed him from that day, and forward.” The benefit which David had conferred in the slaughter of Goliath was of no account in his mind; so rancorous is “envy, even as rottenness in the bonesb.” Even on the very morrow after this victory did Saul “cast his javelin at David, to smite him to the wall:” yea, twice was this effort made by Saul for his destruction; and “twice,” as it were by miracle, “did David avoid the stroke.”

Bent on the destruction of David, Saul had recourse to every expedient he could devise. He offered him his elder daughter to wife, and afterwards his younger daughter Michal; and set his servants to work upon his ambition to accept the offer, on purpose to involve him in war with the Philistines, that so he might fall by their hands. And when David had accomplished double the task imposed upon him, it only provoked the enmity of Saul so much the more against him. Not having succeeded in this device, he “ordered Jonathan his son, and all his servants, to kill David;” which, if Jonathan had not made it known to David, would, by one or other of them, have been effected. And when, by the expostulations of Jonathan with his father, the order was revoked, and safety was guaranteed to David under the sanction of an oath, yea, and when fresh services to a vast extent were rendered by David, still did Saul’s heart burn with rage against him, insomuch that he again cast a javelin at him to destroy him, and sent messengers to watch and assassinate him in his own houseg: and to the fidelity of his wife alone he owed his preservation. Still, with relentless fury, did this blood-thirsty monarch pursue him, with three successive bands of murderers; yea, and he himself also followed with a fourth, to seize and destroy him: yet, notwithstanding the clearest possible interposition of God in his behalf, did Saul still determine upon his death, and even cast a javelin at his own son for presuming to intercede for him. And when David had fled to Gath, and in his way had obtained from Ahimelech the priest, under pretext of being on urgent business from Saul himself, some temporary supply of food, together with Goliath’s sword, Saul, on hearing of it, slew no less than eighty-five priests by the hand of Doeg his informant, and then smote the whole city also with indiscriminate rage, “both men and women, children and sucklings, and oxen, and asses, and sheep, with the edge of the sword.”

Besides his own immediate servants, Saul had traitors in confederacy with him, and armies to execute his murderous projects. The men of Keilah, a fortified city, which David, with great prowess, had saved from the Philistine armies, instead of requiting his kindness to them as they ought, would have betrayed him into the hands of Saul, if David had not escaped from them. “Every day did Saul seek him” with indefatigable vigilance; so that he must have fallen, if God had not, as it were by miracle, preserved him. David had concealed himself in a wood, in the wilderness of Ziph: and the Ziphites, instead of affording him protection, voluntarily offered to deliver him into the hands of Saul, if he would come down to take him: and, in the wilderness of Maon, whither David had taken refuge on a rock, did Saul actually encompass him with his armies, and would have apprehended him, but that he was forced suddenly to abandon his enterprise, in order to repel an invasion of the Philistines. With no less than three thousand men did Saul pursue him, as soon as he had rid himself of the Philistine invaders; so determined was he not to rest till he had slain Davidp.

But that which most of all shews the reason which David had for fear, is, that Saul persevered in his efforts, amidst all imaginable checks, both from God, and from his own conscience. In the wilderness of En-gedi, David and his men were hid in a cave. Saul, unconscious of any danger, went into that very cave wherein they were: and David, unperceived by Saul, who possibly might have lain down to sleep, cut off the skirt of Saul’s robe; and then followed him out of the cave with the skirt in his hand, and shewed him how easily he might have put an end to the contest by the destruction of Saul himself. On that occasion the murderous tyrant was overcome with gratitude; and with tears acknowledged, that his enmity against David was unmerited in the extreme. Who would suppose, that, after such kindness, this wicked monarch could ever again renew his murderous attacks? Yet, on the Ziphites again tendering their traitorous services, did Saul go down again to the wilderness of Ziph with three thousand men to seek him: and there again did he experience, at the hands of David, the same forbearance as before; and had the same decided evidence of it given him as before, by seeing the very spear that was at his bolster, and the cruse of water that was near it, in the hands of David, who might have slain him with the same facility that he had taken them. On this occasion, Saul, a second time, acknowledged the injustice of his conduct towards David, and foretold that David would ultimately prevail. But how was it possible for David to place any reliance on the professions of such a man? or, when the enmity of Saul was so rooted, so inveterate, so active, so widely diffused, and so continually persevering, how could David, who was the object of it, do any thing but fear, and anticipate at last a fatal issue? It is but justice to the character of David to state thus minutely the grounds he had for fear, more especially because we are constrained to say, that,]

Nevertheless, in entertaining desponding fear, he sinned—

[God had promised to David that he should sit upon the throne of Israel: and it was not in the power of man to make void the divine decree. Indeed, God had already shewn, by his various interpositions in his behalf, that under his protection we are safe, even though men and devils should combine their efforts to destroy us. David should have remembered this, and not suffered any thing to shake his faith in God. I mean not to say, that it was easy to exercise faith under such circumstances, and to preserve unruffled composure in the midst of so many perils: conscious of our own infirmity, we can easily make allowance for him: but the point we have in hand is, to determine the quality of David’s conduct on that occasion: and we are constrained to say, that he should have, like his great progenitor, “against hope, believed in hopeu;” and have believed, that though he were actually slain, God would rather raise him again from the dead to sit on the throne of Israel, than suffer one jot or tittle of his word to fail. Thus it was that Abraham acted in reference to Isaac: and thus should David also have been “strong in faith, giving glory to Gody.”]

But that we may bring this matter home to our own bosoms, it will be proper to inquire,

II. What similar apprehensions we have to guard against—

God has given to his people promises of exaltation to thrones of glory. But they also are surrounded with many enemies, and are exposed to many and severe conflicts. Hence they also are sometimes overcome with desponding fears; and are ready, "in their hearts" at least, "to say, I shall one day perish by the hands of my great enemy." Now it is no uncommon thing to hear the parallel drawn between David and them; and to infer, from the sinfulness of David's fears, a corresponding sinfulness in theirs. That we may enter justly into the comparison, I will state,

1. The correspondence there is between the cases—

[God has doubtless given us "a covenant ordered in all things and sure;" and his promises are so "exceeding great and precious," that we may well rest upon them with most unshaken affiance. In that covenant, God provides for our acceptance with him, through the blood of his dear Son; for our renovation after his own divine image, through the influences of his good Spirit; for our perseverance in the ways of holiness even to the end, and for our final admission to his heavenly kingdom. He assures us, that he will "never suffer any one to pluck us out of his hands:" and, because we may well suspect the effect of our own weakness, he engages "never to depart from us to do us good; and to put his fear into our hearts, that we may never depart from him." This covenant He has even "confirmed by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for him to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge, to lay hold on the hope set before us."

But, on the other hand, our conflicts with our spiritual enemies are exceeding heavy, and with little intermission. The world, the flesh, the devil, are all confederate against us; and are diversifying their attacks in endless variety, whilst within our own bosoms there are traitors ready at all times to deliver us up into the hands of our enemies. Thousands of times are we saved from them, almost as by miracle: and enemies, which we thought were slain, rise up against us with renewed vigour; whilst Satan, baffled in one assault, goes and takes with him seven other spirits, mighty as himself, to renew the contest——

Is it to be wondered at, then, if the saints are sometimes discouraged, and ready to fear that they shall one day perish by these continual assaults? Or can they be considered as sinning against God, if they sometimes give way to desponding apprehensions?]

To answer this, I will proceed to state,

2. The difference between the cases—

[David was confessedly and altogether wrong: for the promises which had been made to him were personal, and were irrespective of any moral qualities in him: but those which are made to us, pertain to characters only; and then alone become ours, when we attain the character to which the promises are made. For instance: not a promise in the whole book of God belongs to us, till we repent and believe the Gospel: so that, before we can actually apply the promises to ourselves with an assurance of our interest in them, we must inquire whether we have come to God in his appointed way. To expect the accomplishment of them to our souls without this, were presumption: so that, to ascertain the precise quality of our feelings, we must inquire carefully, what is the special ground of our fear. If we are afraid lest God should forget his promises, or leave us to perish, notwithstanding we trust in him, our belief is highly criminal: but, if we doubt whether we have really come to Christ in his appointed way, we may be doing the very thing which our situation most imperiously calls for. "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves," is a divine command: and, till we have an evidence in ourselves that we have fled to Christ for refuge, any confidence of our acceptance with God would be a fatal delusion. The truth is, that men's difficulties on this subject have arisen, in a great degree, from not distinguishing properly between the graces of faith and hope: faith has respect to the word of promise; and to be weak in the exercise of it, is highly sinful: but hope has respect to the thing promised; and that ought to vary according to the evidence which there is of our title to it. If, therefore, we would judge how far our state of mind really corresponds with that of David, we must bear in remembrance this necessary distinction, and apply it to our state as occasion may require.]

Let me, then, IMPRESS upon your minds these necessary HINTS:

1. Learn to distinguish between what is good and what is evil, in Christian experience—

[Distinguish carefully between faith and presumption, on the one hand; and between fear and unbelief, on the other. That which many call faith, is nothing but an unfounded confidence of their own acceptance with God: and a greater curse cannot befall us, than the attainment of such a faith as that. On the other hand, that which many call unbelief, is a sense of our liableness to fall and perish: and a greater blessing than that cannot be bestowed on any child of man. To all I say, and to all GOD says, "Be not high-minded, but fear:" for "blessed is the man that feareth always." Of God's power or willingness to save you, it is not possible to be too fully assured: but of your own actual acceptance with him, your assurance must be in exact proportion to the evidence of it which is displayed in your life and conversation——]

2. Let your anticipations be under the influence of faith—

[Whatever God has spoken in his word, shall surely come to pass. Now the word of God has said, that "except a man be born again, he cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven:" "Except ye repent, ye shall all perish;" "He that believeth not the Son, shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him:" "Without holiness, no man shall see the Lord." Now you may anticipate the salvation of every penitent and believing saint, as surely as if you saw him in heaven; and the damnation of every impenitent and unbelieving sinner, as

surely as if you saw him already in hell. This, indeed, must be taken into the account, that it is supposed they retain their characters; for otherwise they shall actually change their respective dooms: the man who becomes righteous shall reap the fruit of his righteousness; and the man who departs from his righteousness, shall perish under an accumulated load of guilt and misery. This is God's own express declaration; and his dealings with men in the last day shall be in strict and uniform accordance with it. Our ways may be unequal: but "his are, and shall be equal."]

3. Let nothing operate to drive you from God—
[David said, "There is nothing better for me, than that I should speedily escape into the land of the Philistines;" and for this he is generally condemned, and perhaps justly too: though I cannot forget, that our Saviour, under somewhat similar circumstances, was carried by divine direction into Egypt. But respecting us there can be no doubt. Every thing must drive us rather to God, than from him. Persecution, temptations, yea, even sin itself, must have this effect. We have no refuge whatever, but in God: and if, like Jonah, we were in the belly of hell itself, we must cry unto him. Then "shall all things eventually work together for good." Our very fears shall tend to keep us from undue confidence, and constrain us to cast ourselves more entirely upon God. And, if once they produce this blessed effect, we may rest assured, that not all the universe combined "shall ever separate us from his love."]

CCCVIII

THE WITCH OF ENDOR

1 Sam. 28:15. And Samuel said to Saul, Why hast thou disquieted me, to bring me up? And Saul answered, I am sore distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God is departed from me, and answereth me no more, neither by prophets, nor by dreams: therefore I have called thee, that thou mayest make known unto me what I shall do.

THAT such a thing as witchcraft has existed, we cannot doubt: but what were the incantations used, or what power Satan had to work with and by them, we know not. Certain it is, that in the days of our Lord, Satan appears to have had a greater influence over the bodies of men than he possesses at this time: and as that was permitted of God for the more abundant display of Christ's power, so it is probable that an extraordinary influence over the minds of men may, through the divine permission, have been sometimes exerted by Satan, that the evil tendency of that influence might be the more clearly seen, and the excellence of the divine government be more justly appreciated. As for the various instances of witchcraft recorded in uninspired books, we can place no dependence whatever upon them; because there is often an undue degree of credulity even in great and good men, and a readiness to receive any report that is marvellous, without sufficiently examining the grounds on which it stands. But what is recorded in the Scriptures we may well believe; because it is revealed by One who cannot err. The account given us of the witch of Endor is one of the most remarkable in the Scriptures; though there are in it some difficulties, which have occasioned a diversity of opinions among the learned respecting it. That, however, we may place it before you in an easy and instructive point of view, we shall consider the history of Saul connected with it; and particularly,

I. The state to which he was reduced—
This he himself specifies in the words of our text—
[Long and obstinately had he continued to sin against the convictions of his own conscience; till at last he had provoked God to depart from him. Whilst he was forsaken of his God, the Philistines made war against him, and invaded the land. Then he felt the need of an Almighty Protector, and sought to obtain direction and help from has offended God. But now God would not be found of him, or take any notice of his supplications. In various ways had God been wont to communicate his mind; but now he would return "no answer, either by Urim, or by a prophet, or by a dream."]
Such, alas! is but too frequently the state of ungodly men—
[Many there are who violate habitually the dictates of their own conscience, till they "vex," and "grieve the Holy Spirit," and utterly "quench" his sacred motions. No wonder if at such times trouble come upon them: for indeed the whole creation are ready to "avenge the quarrel of God's covenant," whensoever he shall withdraw from us his protecting hand: and whatever our trials be, or from whatever quarter they come, they will be incomparably heavier, from the consciousness that "God himself is become our enemy." Under their trials the most hardened of men will begin to relent, and will "pour out a prayer when God's chastening is upon them"——"When God slays them, then they will seek him," as the Psalmist says. But at such seasons they are often made to feel what "an evil and bitter thing it is to forsake the Lord." They call upon God, but "he will not hear them, because their hands are full of sin:" yea, he even "laughs at their calamity, and mocks when their fear comethb." He has repeatedly declared, that thus he would treat all who should "set up idols in their hearts:" and melancholy indeed is their state, who have no access to God in their troubles, nor any communications from him for their supports. Yet we can have but little acquaintance with the house of mourning, if we have not met with many such cases in the world.]
Such was the unhappy state of Saul. Let us next proceed to notice,

II. The expedient to which he resorted—

Now he wished for the counsel of that minister, whom when living he neglected and despised;—and, To obtain an interview with Samuel, he had recourse to a witch—

[In former days Saul had exerted himself, agreeably to God's command, to banish witchcraft from the land; and now could not prevail on this woman to use her enchantments, till he had profanely sworn that no punishment should be inflicted on her. At his earnest entreaty, she prevailed to bring up Samuel before him. Many learned men have thought that Samuel himself did not appear, but that Satan assumed his shape and garb. But there is no intimation in the history that this was the case; on the contrary, every expression has directly the opposite aspect: and it seems that even the witch herself was beyond measure astonished at the unexpected success of her incantation. It is urged on the other hand, that a witch could never prevail to bring Samuel from the grave, or his soul from the mansions of the blessed. True; but God might see fit to send Samuel on this occasion, to confirm all the threatenings which he had denounced when living: nor is there any weight in the objection, that he speaks of being "disquieted," and "brought up," because this was only popular language suited to the prevailing notions of the day: and when he speaks of Saul and his sons being "with him on the morrow," he can only mean, that they should be removed into the invisible world by death——It seems clear, that, as God afterwards sent a living prophet to reprove Amaziah's application to the heathen idol, so now he sent a departed prophet to reprove in Saul a similar offence.

But what availed this interview with Samuel? Samuel himself put the question to Saul, "Wherefore dost thou ask of me, seeing the Lord is departed from thee, and is become thine enemy?" Vain indeed was that hope which sought in a broken cistern what the fountain alone could supply.]

And equally vain are those refuges to which sinners flee, when they are forsaken by their God—

[Men in a time of trouble will catch at any thing for comfort. Some will endeavour to drown reflection in the cares or pleasures of the world; whilst others take refuge in infidelity: but not even Saul's expedient was more vain than these: for what is there either in business or pleasure to satisfy a guilty conscience? or what can infidelity adduce to disprove the truths which it would set aside? "In uttering error against the Lord, we only make empty the soul of the hungry, and cause the drink of the thirsty to fail"——Such are the expedients, whatever they may be, whereby we labour to supply the place of an offended God——]

From the close of the history we learn,

III. The misery he brought upon his own soul—

Great indeed were his disappointment and distress—

[Behold the melancholy train; dejection, desperation, suicide! He fainted and fell as soon as ever he heard the fate that awaited him: and was with great difficulty persuaded to take such refreshment as was necessary for his support. But no humiliation of soul did he manifest; nor, as far as we see, did he present to God one single petition. He sank down in sullen desperation, determining to meet his fate, but using no effort to obtain mercy at the hands of God. The battle terminated according to the word of Samuel; and Saul himself, to prevent the mortification of falling alive into the hands of his enemies, fell upon his own sword, and put a period to his own existence.]

But such are generally the effects of seeking in the creature what can be found in God alone—

[Many are oppressed with great dejection of mind: but if they would search out the causes of their trouble, they would find it generally to spring from lusts unmortified, and iniquities unrepented of. And how often does dejection lead to despair! Strange as it may seem, it is easier to abandon oneself to an hopeless despondency, than to renounce beloved sins, and persevere in an earnest inquiry after God. Yes; the heart, instead of relenting, is more generally "hardened through the deceitfulness of sin;" and when we begin to say, "There is no hope," then we add, "I have loved idols, and after them will I go." The close of all is, in too many cases, suicide: men finding no relief in God, fly to death itself as the only remedy for the troubles of life. Ah! unhappy men, who venture thus to rush into the presence of that God, who has hid his face from them!]

Let us LEARN then to BEWARE,

1. Of impenitence in sin—

[Many who, like Saul, have been hopeful in their beginnings, fall from one sin to another, till they set both God and conscience at defiance. But however sweet sin may be in the mouth, it will prove as gall in the stomach. It will destroy all peace of mind, all hope in God, all prospect in eternity. O let it not be harboured in our hearts! Whatever our besetting sin be, let us never rest till we have repented of it, and washed it away in the Redeemer's blood, and obtained the victory over it through the power and grace of God. If not purged out, it will defile and destroy our whole souls.]

2. Of seeking help in the creature—

[God is the only refuge of sinful man: wherever we may look, there is no help for us in any other. Not only are men and devils unable to assist us; even all the angels in heaven would be incapable of affording us any effectual help. Whatever creature we rest upon, it will prove only "as a broken reed, which will pierce the hand that rests upon it." We must learn in every difficulty to say with Jehoshaphat, "Lord, I have no power against this great company that cometh against me, neither know I what to do; but mine eyes are upon Thee."]

3. Of giving way to despondency—

[To despair, is to seal our own condemnation. We must never conclude, that, because God has forsaken us, “he will be no more entreated.” Had Saul himself truly and unfeignedly implored mercy at his hands, God would not have utterly cast him off. “God never did, nor ever will, say to any, Seek ye my face in vain.”]

CCCIX

ENCOURAGEMENT IN GOD

1 Sam. 30:6. But David encouraged himself in the Lord his God.

IN seasons of prosperity the superior happiness of a Christian is not visible to all, but in adverse circumstances he has a manifest advantage over others. The ungodly, when the cisterns from whence they draw their water are broken or emptied, have no comfort left: but when every stream is dried up, the godly have still access to the Fountain itself. This was experienced by the Church of old, and it is beautifully exemplified in the history before us. David was in great trouble, being suspected by the Philistines, plundered by the Amalekites, and threatened by his own soldiers: but in the midst of all he encouraged himself in God.

We shall shew,

I. What reason he had to do so—

Though reduced to the greatest extremities, David derived encouragement,

1. From the perfections of God as revealed in the word—

[He was no stranger to the character of God as it was revealed to Moses, or to the unnumbered illustrations of it which the history of his nation afforded him: consequently he knew that there was nothing too hard for God to effect, or too great for him to give.]

2. From the experience which he himself had had of God—

[The lion, the bear, the Philistine giant, and the murderous rage of Saul, had given him abundant proofs of God’s superintending providence: these he called to mind in this season of trial and distress, and wisely judged, that, with such a Friend on his side, he had no cause for fear.]

3. From the covenant which God had made with him—

[God had covenanted with him to give him the throne of Israel; hence he was assured that his life should be spared till this promise was accomplished. It was in this view that he was enabled to call God HIS God; and the thought of this relation to God added ten-fold confidence to his soul.]

While we admire the conduct of David in this particular, let us consider,

II. What reason we have to do likewise—

Certainly the grounds of David’s encouragement are equally calculated for our support—

[God is still the same almighty and gracious Being as ever: his arm is not shortened, nor is his ear heavy with respect to us. We may also see much of his goodness in our own experience. Wonderful have been the ways in which he has dealt with us for the awakening, preserving, and sanctifying of our souls. He has also covenanted with us that “he will never leave us nor forsake us,” nor shall one jot or tittle of his word ever fail. Are not these then grounds of encouragement to us as well as to David?]

But we have far greater reason to encourage ourselves in God than David had.

We have seen more stupendous displays of God’s power—

[David had read of the wonders wrought in Egypt and the wilderness: but what were these wonders when compared with the victories gained over all the passions and prejudices of the world by the preaching of a few poor fishermen?]

We have beheld more astonishing exercises of his love—

[The history of the Jews records many instances of God’s love towards them: but what were these when compared with the gift of his dear Son to die for us, and of his Holy Spirit to renew us? These things are as much beyond any thing that David had ever seen, as the substance is beyond the shadow.]

We have experienced more abundant proofs of his faithfulness—

[How many promises, made to the Church at large, have been accomplished by the mission of Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit! And all the members of the Church, from its first establishment to the present moment, have found the promises of the Gospel fulfilled to them in their season! In proportion therefore as God’s faithfulness has been tried and ascertained, our confidence in him must be increased.]

APPLICATION—

1. Let us endeavour to secure God as our God—

[Unless God be ours, we can have but little reason to encourage ourselves in him. Let us then look to Christ, that through him we may find acceptance with God; so shall God be our Friend, our Father, and our “eternal great Reward.”]

2. Let us encourage ourselves in God—

[We must expect to meet with many difficulties and troubles: nor can we find any grounds of encouragement in ourselves, but in God there is all that we can either need or desire. Are we then discouraged by outward difficulties or inward corruptions? let us direct our eyes to him, as our compassionate, almighty, and ever faithful Friend. Let us, like David, chide our unbelief; and henceforth say with him, “In the day of my trouble I will call upon Godi.”]