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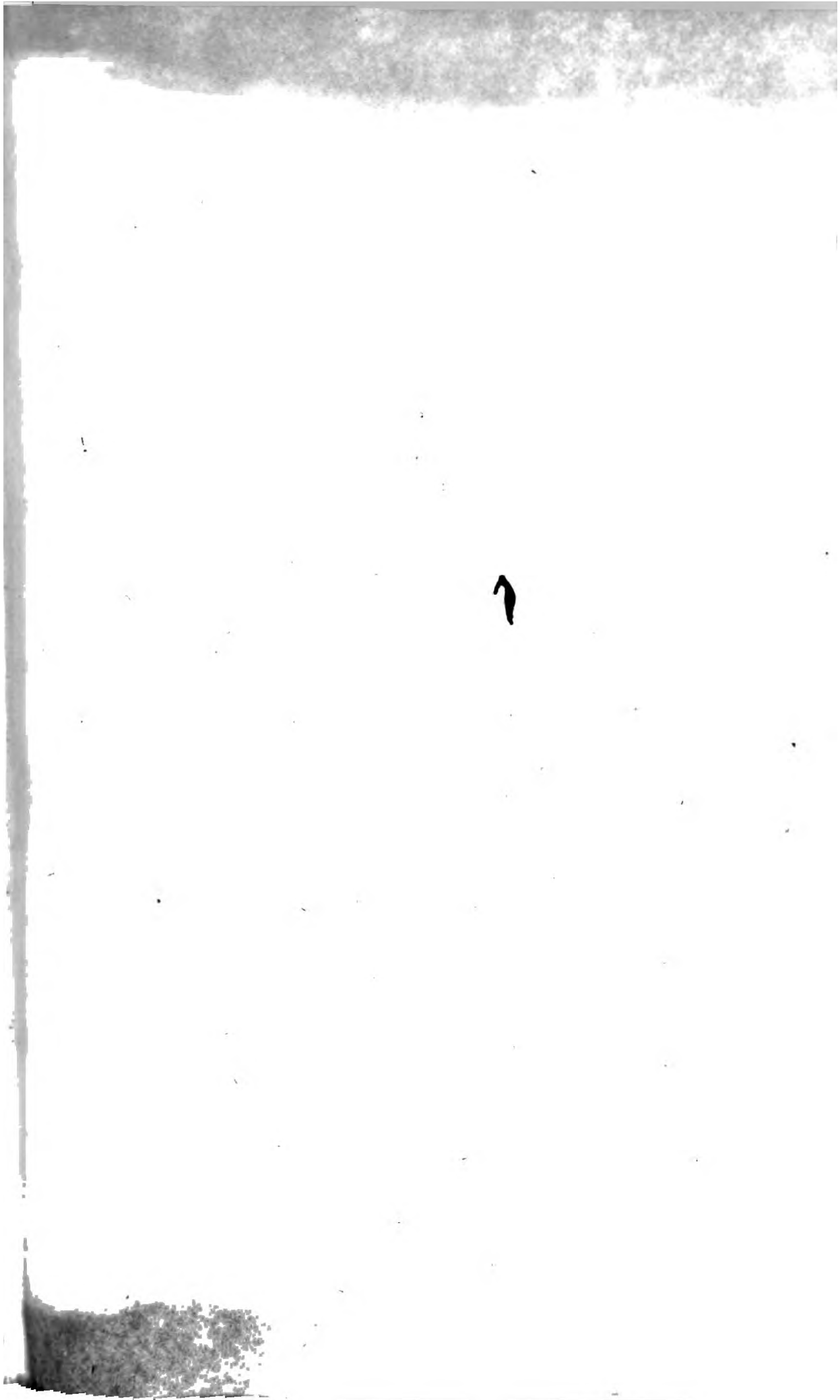
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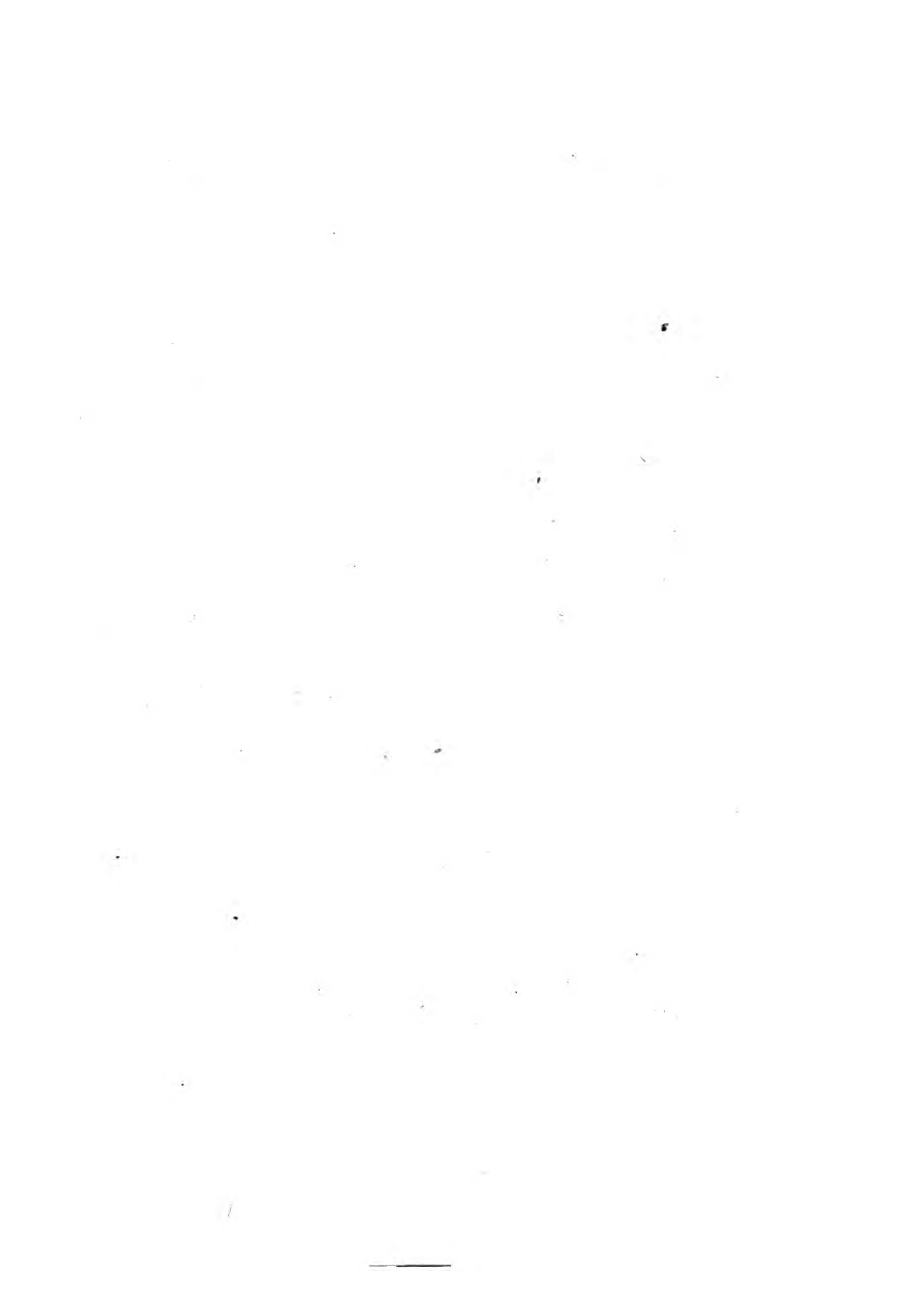


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8° M. A. 61.





SCRIPTURE CHARACTERS;

OR,

A PRACTICAL IMPROVEMENT

OF THE

PRINCIPAL HISTORIES IN THE

Old and New Testament.

IN FOUR VOLUMES.

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THE TENTH EDITION;

CONTAINING A BIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT OF THE AUTHOR.



VOL. III.

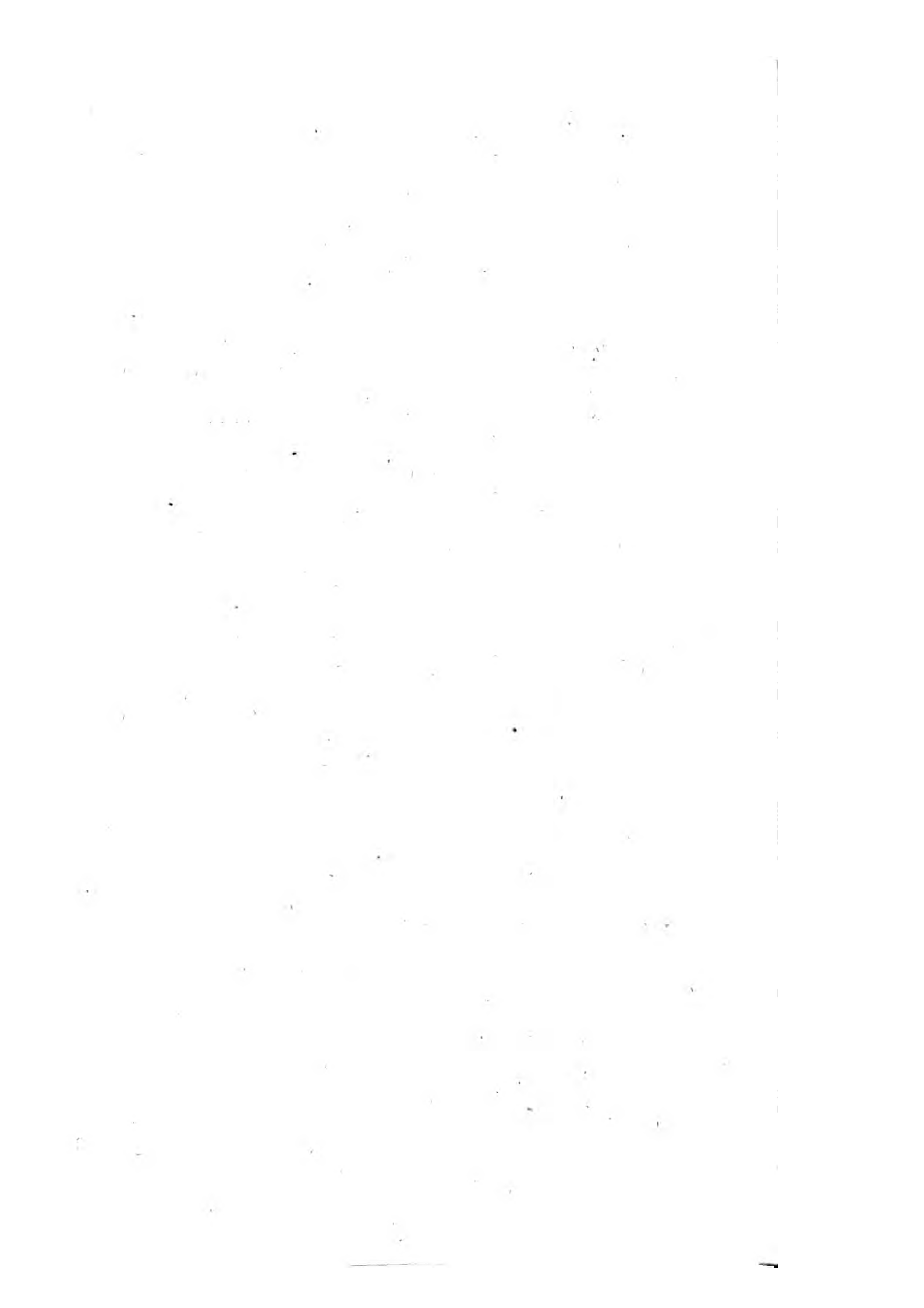
GOD, WHO AT SUNDRY TIMES AND IN DIVERS MANNERS SPAKE IN
TIMES PAST UNTO THE FATHERS BY THE PROPHETS, HATH IN
THESE LAST DAYS SPOKEN UNTO US BY HIS SON—
THEREFORE WE OUGHT TO GIVE THE MORE
EARNEST HEED.—HEB. i. 1, 2. ii. 1.

LONDON :

PRINTED FOR GALE AND FENNER,
PATERNOSTER ROW;

By Cornish and Co. 24, Nelson Square, Surrey Road.

1815.



SCRIPTURE CHARACTERS:

VOLUME THE THIRD.

CONTAINING

THE FIRST PART OF THE PRINCIPAL HISTORIES

IN THE

NEW TESTAMENT.

CONTENTS TO VOL. III.

					Page
Chap. I.	. . . . .	The character of John			1
		the Baptist . . .			1
Chap. II.	Sect. 1.	. . . . .	Jesus Christ		24
	Sect. 2.	. . . . .			43
	Sect. 3.	. . . . .			62
	Sect. 4.	. . . . .			82
	Sect. 5.	. . . . .			99
	Sect. 6.	. . . . .			118
	Sect. 7.	. . . . .			133
	Sect. 8.	. . . . .			152
	Sect. 9.	. . . . .			168
	Sect. 10.	. . . . .			181
	Sect. 11.	. . . . .			198
	Sect. 12.	. . . . .			214
	Sect. 13.	. . . . .			229
	Sect. 14.	. . . . .			242
	Sect. 15.	. . . . .			259
	Sect. 16.	. . . . .			276
	Sect. 17.	. . . . .			292
	Sect. 18.	. . . . .			310
	Sect. 19.	. . . . .			327
	Sect. 20.	. . . . .			342
	Sect. 21.	. . . . .			360
	Sect. 22.	. . . . .			380
	Sect. 23.	. . . . .			398
	Sect. 24.	. . . . .			418
	Sect. 25.	. . . . .			437
	Sect. 26.	. . . . .			454
	Sect. 27.	. . . . .			471
	Sect. 28.	. . . . .			490
	Sect. 29.	. . . . .			507
	Sect. 30.	. . . . .			526
	Sect. 31.	. . . . .			541
	Sect. 32.	. . . . .			559

SCRIPTURE CHARACTERS.

JOHN THE BAPTIST.

CHAPTER I.

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

THE Old and New Testament are closely connected as parts of the same plan, which mutually confirm and illustrate each other. Both are derived from the same divine original; and therefore there can be no opposition between them. But, without detracting from the authority or excellence of the more ancient Scriptures, we may assert that the New Testament claims our peculiar regard, as containing the clearest and most interesting revelation ever delivered to mankind, and

exhibiting the completion of the great design, which had been in some measure made known from the beginning. Salvation was published to Adam immediately after the fall, and in every succeeding age intimations were given that redemption should be accomplished. Yet much obscurity rested on all these various dispensations, till it pleased God to disperse the darkness by the full manifestation of his grace through Jesus Christ, and to "bring life and immortality to light through the Gospel."*

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

We are now passing from the comparative obscurity of all the preceding ages, to behold the splendour of a

* 2 Tim. i. 10.

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

But who shall be appointed "to go before the face of the Lord?" We might conclude it must be one of distinguished excellence; and accordingly we find the highest character given of JOHN THE BAPTIST, for whom this honour was reserved. Our Lord styles him "a burning and a shining light,"† and declares, "among them that are born of women, there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist."‡ Many very eminent persons are exhibited in the Old Testament; but, upon the opening of the new dispensation, the grace of God was more abundantly displayed. John the Baptist had the pre-eminence above all the ancient patriarchs and prophets, in the dignity of his office, and his spiritual discernment. Many of them had desired to see and hear those things, of which he was witness; but they were not permitted. They spake and wrote

* Isa. lx. 1.

† John v. 35.

‡ Matt. xi. 11.

much concerning the Saviour, and had large discoveries of his worth and excellence : but John was favoured with more express revelations, understood and described more clearly the nature and benefits of his redemption, and himself beheld his glory. They pointed to him as to a distant object, the “ Messiah that was to come ;” John not only proclaimed his immediate approach, but referred the people to him, as already present before them, saying, “ Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world !”*

Yet the commendation of the Baptist by our Lord is given with some limitation. Though John was advanced above all who preceded him, many, who came after him, are placed in a higher point of elevation. “ He that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” For, as the great mystery of godliness was soon afterwards more fully opened, one of the least abilities and meanest office in the church of Christ (which is often signified by “ the kingdom of heaven”) might understand more of the plan of salvation than even this eminent saint. Not merely the Apostles, but other inferior ministers, and even private Christians in the present day, are to be considered as favoured with clearer discoveries than John of the riches of divine grace, and of the peculiar nature and glory of the Gospel dispensation. Let us, then, adore the mercy of God in affording us opportunities and privileges, which some of his most illustrious servants, in former times, did not enjoy. Let us value and improve our advantages, and pray that we may obtain such distinct views

* John i. 19.

of redemption, through the blood of Christ, as are suited to the excellency of that economy under which we are placed.

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

* Luke i. 5, &c.

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

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

dom, holiness, and zeal, and other special gifts for his ministerial service. "The child grew, and waxed strong in spirit."

Shall not we, also, perceive and admire the merciful interposition of our God, in behalf of his church? He hath been ever mindful of his promise; and at the proper season he hath not delayed to raise up suitable instruments for the execution of his purposes. "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings he hath perfected praise."* And this consideration furnishes encouragement both to parents and children. We should be concerned, and emboldened to pray for them, that they also, like John, may be sanctified from the womb. And if we see that they possess, not only a vigorous constitution, but wisdom and fervour in the service of God, and that early habits of goodness are formed in them, let us ascribe it to the divine grace, and devoutly acknowledge "The hand of the Lord is with them."

John was an eminent pattern of religion even from his infancy. Ah! how different are the generality of young persons among ourselves; seeking happiness from carnal gratifications, and the pride of life! But behold the Baptist flying from the noise of riot and dissipation, and cultivating communion with God, by meditation and prayer, in a most retired situation. It is supposed that he was deprived of his pious parents in his tender years, and that, under the influence of the Spirit, he secluded himself from society, to be the better fitted for his future service. "He was in the deserts," in those

* Matt. xxi. 16.

parts of Judea which were little inhabited, where he was separated from public temptations, and had opportunities of private devotion. There he continued "till the day of his showing unto Israel," when he entered on his prophetic office, as it were by inauguration, at the age of thirty years. It is granted there was a peculiar austerity and mortification in John's conduct, suited to the purposes of his ministry, which is not enjoined upon all. But, if you plead an exemption from such severities, are you therefore at liberty to indulge every vain and foolish desire of your hearts, to spend your time and strength in sensual indulgence, and, by abusing the world, to provoke the God who made it? Possibly you may speak well of John's eminent sanctity, because he is removed from the earth, and his example cannot now disturb you: but do you not hate those in the present day who in any measure resemble him, and live in holy temperance and self-denial, "renouncing the pomps and vanities of this wicked world?"*

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

* Catechism. † Isa. xl. 3. Mal. iii. 1, iv. 5, 6.

abstemious fare, as well as in the ardour and fidelity with which he exercised his ministry.*

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

It were easy to show that he came at the very season which had been foretold; for the sceptre was departing from Judah, the seventy weeks of Daniel were expiring, and many were "waiting for the Consolation of Israel," when John appeared to declare that the promised Deliverer of the church was at hand, and that "the Lord, whom they sought, would suddenly come to his temple."† The Scriptures cannot be broken: every part shall have its full accomplishment in the proper time and way. It becomes us to leave to God the completion of his own plan, and to believe

* Matt. xi. 14. xvii. 13. Luke i. 17.

† Gen. xlix. 10. Dan. ix. 24. Mal. iii. 1.

and rejoice, that He, who remembers his holy covenant, will perform whatever shall be needful for the salvation of his people.

According to the common Christian era, called Anno Domini, 26. It is supposed that John did not enter upon his ministry, nor come forward to public view, till he was thirty years old.* We do not therefore censure him as averse to engage in his work; but we grieve to observe some very unlike him, rash and precipitate, full of their own importance, eager to be employed, who run, and are not sent. He waited in modest retirement till he received his commission. But when "the word of God came to him" (and the revelation, doubtless, carried its own evidence with it), he delayed no longer, but went forth, with the utmost earnestness, to reprove and awaken the careless and impenitent. Every thing in his appearance, his manners, and his doctrine, tended to excite a solemnity and a seriousness in the minds of his audience. He was clothed, as the ancient prophets, with a rough garment, which was composed only of camels' hair, and bound about him with a leathern girdle; and he subsisted on such food as the wilderness afforded, "locusts and wild honey." His address also was calculated to strike an awe into the people; for he spake with authority as a messenger from God, "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Here we observe the nature and the grand subject of his preaching. He declared that the Lord God was about to establish in the earth that holy and spiritual kingdom which had

* Matt. iii. 1, &c. Luke iii. 1, &c.

been foretold, especially by Daniel ;* and that no one could be admitted into it who did not abhor and forsake his sin, and with a contrite heart return unto the Lord. He considered all persons, without exception, as in a state of depravity, guilt, and condemnation. He unreservedly exhibited the doctrine, which alone prepares for a renewal of heart. He was the preacher of that discipline which makes the soul submit to the grace and government of Jesus, and which must be felt and understood in order to its everlasting salvation. Those who professed a deep compunction were required to conform to the significant rite of baptism, which he administered ; thereby publicly acknowledging their pollution, their need of a spiritual washing, and determination to abandon every evil way.

A teacher so remarkable could not but excite general notice ; and accordingly we find that immense multitudes of people resorted to him, and were brought under the most serious impressions. Yet he sought not popular applause ; for his admonitions were so pointed, his reproofs so severe, that they seemed likely to be offensive in the extreme. Men of all ranks and characters, the most opposite in principle, attended on his ministry ; but he flattered none. While many of the Pharisees and Sadducees flocked after him (the former of whom were strict in all external observances of religion, the latter licentious and profane), he addressed them in terms of the sharpest reprehension, and described them all as under the same condemnation.

* Dan. ii. 44. vii. 14. 27.

Surprised by their appearance, and suspecting their sincerity, he called on them to give decided proofs of their penitence by fruits of righteousness. He warned them that their relation to Abraham, and their place in the visible church, would avail them nothing; that the last trial was then afforded them; and that, if this were neglected, their case was desperate, their everlasting destruction unavoidable.

Many of his polite and learned hearers were offended with his plainness of speech, and unwilling to comply with his injunctions; but, among the common people and notorious sinners, many were awakened by his doctrine, and probably converted to God.* These discovered a serious attention to his words, and professed a readiness to be directed by him in their future conduct. Accordingly, he pressed upon them the duties of charity, justice, and forbearance, and cautioned them against those particular sins to which their respective situations exposed them.†

A doubt seemed to be entertained whether he were not the promised Messiah; but this was soon resolved by his unreserved declarations. He testified that the Saviour, who was about to appear, possessed a dignity immensely superior, and that he considered himself unworthy to perform the meanest offices for so exalted a Character. He represented Him as pouring upon his church the abundant influences of the Holy Ghost, which, resembling fire in its operations and effects, enlivens and purifies the soul. But he warned

* Luke vii. 29, 30.

† iii. 10—18.

his audience that the same illustrious Personage is not to be imposed upon by any vain pretences to piety ; for that he will make an awful separation between the righteous and the wicked, detect the hypocrites, and destroy them for ever.

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

We must perceive and admire the meekness and humility of John, who was so careful to assume nothing to himself, and to give all glory to Christ. The notice of the Jewish sanhedrim at Jerusalem was excited by the surprising effects of his ministry, and they sent messengers to inquire the nature of his claims, and the intent of his baptism. To them he replied, with the

* John i. 15, &c.

strongest asseverations, that he pretended not to be any other than the harbinger of the Saviour, and referred them to Jesus as the Person whom he came to introduce. Day after day, while Jesus probably attended upon his preaching, John repeated his testimony concerning him, and called upon the surrounding multitudes to regard Him as the great propitiatory Sacrifice, which alone can expiate our guilt: "Behold," said he, "the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!"

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

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

* John iii. 16, &c.

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

You admire the zeal, the courage, and the faithfulness of the Baptist; but are you desirous that your ministers should in any measure copy after him? Are you willing to hear the doctrine which he constantly delivered, and to be addressed with the same unreserved

plainness? Be that as it may, your wishes in this case are not to be consulted: "whether you will hear; or whether you will forbear," the ambassadors of Christ must declare, "Except ye repent, ye shall all perish."* Yes; it is indispensably requisite that the most regular and decent persons should be converted, as well as open and gross offenders. This mortifies your pride, and alarms your fears; and therefore you are ready to quarrel with those who assert such unwelcome truths. You cannot bear to be told of "fleeing from the wrath to come," or of being "burned up with fire unquenchable:" how, then, would you have been reconciled to the preaching of the Baptist?

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

* Luke xiii. 3.

† Acts iii. 26.

that contempt and rejection of the Son of God will inevitably expose you to the wrath of God, and that throughout eternity.

Do you profess a serious concern for salvation? Your teachers, like John, will require you to evince your sincerity by your holy conduct, and will earnestly exhort you not to deceive yourselves by vain pretences to religion. They will therefore call upon you to discharge with fidelity the particular duties of your respective places, and to beware of those sins which most easily beset you. Are you willing to listen to such instructions, and to yield a cheerful obedience? The most glorious effects may be expected from the ministry which is exercised, like that of the Baptist, with wisdom, courage, impartiality, and faithfulness. Doubtless he laboured to good purpose among the men of that generation, and "many of the children of Israel did he turn to the Lord their God," according to the prophecy.* It appears, too, that his testimony was recollected after his death, in consequence of which, probably, many were disposed to believe on the Saviour.† But it must not be concealed that his excellence of character did not secure him from contempt and ridicule. Among some, especially of the higher ranks, he was accounted no better than a madman or a demoniac, "He hath a devil" was the scornful reproach cast upon him.‡ The case is somewhat similar among ourselves; "The preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness;" the most exemplary con-

* Luke i. 16.

† John x. 41.

‡ Luke vii. 33.

duct in ministers will not silence the gainsayers; and if John were to rise from the dead, and to preach as before, it is not likely that he would meet with any better treatment. Such kind of censures and derision will, indeed, appear of little consequence to those who are chiefly solicitous to promote the honour of Christ and the salvation of souls. Whatever railing accusations are brought against them, exposed as they may be to violent opposition or "cruel mockings," if they are the instruments of turning any to the Lord, and rescuing them from the wrath to come, they will consider themselves as abundantly repaid, and distinguished with peculiar favour.

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

John, we have seen, was held in high estimation among the common people, and this excited the notice, if not the jealousy and displeasure, of the great. Accordingly he was sent for, perhaps from motives of curiosity, to the court of Herod, the tetrarch of Galilee,

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

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

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

Shall we mourn for the imprisonment of the Prophet? We must lament the interruption of his ministry; but there is no doubt that he was happier in his chains than his persecutors in the palace. Let us not be afraid of the consequences to which a faithful discharge of our duty may expose us. Let us revere our consciences, and dread the displeasure of God more than the frowns of the world. Let us openly avow our attachment to Christ, and our abhorrence of sin; nor dare to give up the truth in compliment to any man. For it were better to go down into a dungeon for righteousness' sake, than to enjoy the favour of princes, with the reproaches of our own minds, and a fear of the divine judgments.

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

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

John, when we are quitting the world, to bear our testimony for Christ, to rejoice in the advancement of His kingdom, to direct our friends to Him, and labour to establish them in the knowledge and love of his name!

The last scene of this valuable life was most affecting. At a sumptuous feast in Herod's palace, the murder of John was contrived and accomplished. The king, being pleased with the graceful movements of Herodias's daughter, who entertained the company by her dancing, rashly promised with an oath that he would grant her whatever she would ask; and she, by her mother's instigation, petitioned for the head of the Baptist. This appeared to that shameless woman the most desirable gift in Herod's dominions; for she was fired with rage against the preacher, who had openly declared his abhorrence of her iniquitous conduct; and therefore, to satiate her malice, an executioner was immediately dispatched to the prison, where the good man perished by the hand of violence.

How mysterious are the ways of Providence, which permitted such a life to be cut short in the midst, and by means so ignominious! We are ready to expostulate with God concerning the wisdom and the justice of his proceedings: for, while the wicked triumph, and the righteous are oppressed, it may seem as if He had forsaken the earth, or took no care of his servants. What shall we say to cases like this before us? Why doth He not plead the cause of the upright, and confound the purposes of his enemies? But we have no right to reply against Him. "He doeth all things well:" nor, in the end, shall any of his faithful people complain,

though they may suffer bonds and imprisonment, or martyrdom itself, for their attachment to Him. We mourn for the cruel and premature death of the Prophet; but to him the stroke could not be unwelcome, which instantly transmitted him from a gloomy dungeon to everlasting glory.

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

You, who hate and persecute the zealous servants of Christ, would have taken part with Herod and his associates. But, ah! consider with whom you would wish to be joined hereafter! Will you not desire to have your portion with them whom you now despise for their holy singularity? O, seek, then, to possess their faith and love, their self-denial and devotion. "Give diligence to make your calling and election sure;" and you shall soon be, where the Baptist is, adoring your God and Saviour; and you shall there attain a higher degree of knowledge, sanctity, bliss, and glory, than what any of the most excellent characters are capable of enjoying upon earth.

We pray, therefore, with our Church,

"Almighty God, by whose providence thy servant John Baptist was wonderfully born, and sent to prepare

the way of thy Son our Saviour, by preaching of repentance ; make us so to follow his doctrine and holy life, that we may truly repent according to his preaching, and, after his example, constantly speak the truth, boldly rebuke vice, and patiently suffer for the truth's sake, through Jesus Christ our Lord. - Amen."*

* Collect for Saint John Baptist's Day, ...

J E S U S C H R I S T.

CHAP. II.—SECT. I.

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

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

But the difficulty of the task should not discourage our humble, though weak, endeavours. Only let us undertake it with earnest supplication, that we may not “darken counsel by words without knowledge.” In the study of every part of the sacred Scriptures, we have

continual need of prayer, that we may possess a just and spiritual discernment. But, here, especially, while the Lord himself comes down from heaven, and passes by before us, we should beg that the veil may be removed from our minds, and that He, “who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, may shine into our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”* The history of Cæsar or Alexander may be perused with indifference, or, if you please, with the severity of criticism; but the history of the Son of God is no matter of idle amusement, or curious speculation: for every thing here is wonderful, and designed to excite in us the devout affections of gratitude, love, and zeal.

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

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

* 1 Cor. iv. 6, † Luke ii. 29, 30. ‡ 2 Cor, iii, 18.

is it probable that such a resemblance would ever be pretended.

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

But it is asked, are the records, which describe his life and character, genuine accounts, and what may safely be relied on ? The answer is obvious : the books of the New Testament have a more convincing evidence of their authenticity than any other writings of the like ancient date. The history of our Lord is transmitted to us by those who possessed the most certain information upon the subject. The Evangelists, Matthew and John, were disciples and constant attendants of Jesus ; Mark and Luke, also, had the best opportunities of being acquainted with his actions and discourses from the Apostles themselves ; the former, it is believed, being the companion of St. Peter, as the latter was of St. Paul. These published their narrations very soon after the transactions which they relate,

and in the midst of enemies ; so that their accounts, if false, might, and no doubt would, have been denied and confuted. But they have stood the test of ages ; every attempt to overturn them tends to confirm their authority the more. Indeed their integrity appears by many indubitable marks. The manner of their writing is peculiar to themselves ; for their artless simplicity is such as proves that they did not contrive a system of their own. They delivered plain facts without disguise, and generally without any reflections, which might bias their readers ; so that, from the circumstances fairly represented, we are left to draw the necessary conclusions for ourselves.

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

I. His Pre-existence.—We do not inquire after any condition in which we might be supposed to be placed previous to our birth ; for this, clearly, is our first state. But his appearance in human flesh is described by such expressions as cannot be applied to any mere man, and prove that he was possessed of a glorious being prior to his nativity. “ He was sent into the world” as his

Father's Messenger ; " He came down from heaven," and took our nature, of his own accord ; all which are mentioned as instances of his amazing condescension ; but such they could not be, if his existence had commenced only at his incarnation. He speaks of himself as having " glory with the Father, before the world was ; and St. Paul asserts that " he made himself of no reputation," or " emptied himself of his glory," that he might be obedient unto death.* And does not this language imply an antecedent state and dignity ? Our life was not the effect of our choice ; but he is represented as voluntarily entering upon that, which he had in common with us, to fulfil his own gracious purposes : and this very consideration lays us under unspeakable obligations of gratitude, love, and obedience to Him. " Lo ! I come," said he, † which expression denotes that he possessed some other mode of being, before he was born of his virgin mother.

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

* John xvii. 5. Phil. ii. 7. † Heb. x. 7.

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

§ Col. i. 16, 17. Psal. xxxiii. 9.

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

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

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

and of all other books most dangerous and destructive, as being the cause of much idolatry, in the worship of the Son of God.

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

"He was in the beginning," not only at the first production of this world, but before the existence of any

* John i. 1, &c. † 14.

‡ 1 John i. 1. Rev. xix. 13.

creature. "He was with God," in the same state of unlimited happiness and glory, and One with JEHOVAH by an ineffable and mysterious union of nature. Nor was he raised to this exalted rank by an act of peculiar favour ; but he always possessed it as of his own right, since "he was God," partaking of the perfections of Deity in all their fulness. In confirmation of this, the Apostle, ascribes the origin of the universe to him : for "all things were made by him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." And will it not be allowed, that "he, who built all things, is God?"* Some, indeed, have maintained, that in the formation of the world he acted by a delegated power, and not by his own essential divinity. But how is this consistent with St. Paul's account, that "all things were created FOR HIM," as well as "by him," and that by him all things consist?"† In what can he be inferior to Jehovah, who is not only the Author, but the final Cause, of all? Further, the Evangelist declares, that he had existence in himself as its original source, from which the whole human race derive all their understanding, happiness, and comfort. "In him was life ; and the life was the light of men."

The splendour of his majesty was in a great measure concealed during his residence upon earth ; but there were those who saw through the veil of his humanity ; and they have borne a decided testimony. "We beheld his glory, the glory as of the Only-begotten of the Father."‡ This could not be any external lustre ; for

* Heb. iii. 4. † Col. i. 16, 17. ‡ John i. 14.

his condition was attended with circumstances of peculiar meanness, and, probably, he carried marks of affliction in his countenance. Yet he appeared, both from his words and works, to be One of superior dignity; for he spake and acted in numerous instances as Lord of the whole creation. There were some special seasons, when the brightness of the Deity broke forth upon his favoured attendants. These saw some part of the radiance of his majesty, when he was transfigured on the mount: they heard the voice, by which "he received from God the Father honour and glory:"* and they his chosen witnesses have declared that which they saw and heard; "showing unto us that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto them."† The celestial spirits, also, who could not mistake his real character, were commanded to express their reverence of him. For, when the Lord God "bringeth in the first-begotten into the world, he saith, And let all the Angels of God worship him."‡

Let us, then, maintain the truth, which is clearly delivered and fully confirmed to us; nor fear, on the testimony of the Apostles, to receive Jesus as "the Lord of glory."|| If even angels bow before him with pro-

* Matt. xvii. 1, &c. 2 Pet. i. 16, 17.

† 1 John i. 1—3.

‡ Heb. i. 6.

|| Many are the publications, in which the apostolical testimony for the divinity of Christ is admirably collected and stated. To those who may not have leisure for the perusal of the works of Dr. Waterland, we might recommend "A Short Defence of the Divinity of Christ," published at Leeds, price 3d., Jones's Catholig

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

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

III. His Incarnation.—Various and opposite errors have prevailed respecting the Person of Christ; some denying him divinity, others humanity. We believe that they were both truly united in him, and that he was very God, as well as very man. Here, indeed many objections are raised. Such an assumption of the manhood, it is said, is unintelligible, unnecessary, and impossible. Alas! to what impiety may we be led by our

Doctrine of the Trinity," &c. If the learned reader wish to see the testimony of the primitive church, in addition to that of the Apostles, the writings of Bishop Bull, particularly his "*Defensio fidei Nicænæ*," and Bishop Horsley's Tracts in controversy with Dr. Priestly," are deserving of his regard.

* Luke vi. 46.

own pride and presumption ! There are those who will not allow any thing to Jehovah which exceeds their own scanty comprehension, and, without regarding his express declarations, arrogantly determine that it is not proper or possible for him to exist and act in any other way than what they themselves understand, and even prescribe, for him ; and then they dignify their conceits with the name of “ Rational Religion.”

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

We allow, then, that there is a sense in which the Son is inferior to the Father ; for, as his servant, he is sent by him, receives his commission from him, and to him likewise owes his exaltation. But expressions of

that kind, which are frequent in the Scriptures, by no means contradict the doctrine here maintained ; for they are used only with a reference to his manhood, or his mediatorial office, in which it is granted that he was in a state of subjection. The incarnation being admitted, the Bible speaks a consistent language respecting the Redeemer ; whereas, otherwise, it would be at variance with itself.

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

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

* Heb. ii. 17.

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

IV. The preparations made for his appearance.— Upon a slight view of the subject, we must suppose that he was about to carry into execution some scheme of immense magnitude and importance. An expectation of his coming had been raised in the minds of men for four thousand years. His introduction into the world, therefore, was not a sudden event, nor a design formed in haste. Every circumstance had been foreseen and declared, nay, appointed, from eternity; the everlasting counsels of Jehovah had determined it; the course of divine Providence had been directed to it; and, probably, the earth itself created for it. The grand purpose of his incarnation was revealed immediately after the fall; and the church had been taught to trust and rejoice in his atonement, even before his appearance, as it has done since that period, and will do to the end of time.

It is asked, “Why was his coming delayed so long, if indispensably necessary? or why not longer, if not wanted before?” These are ignorant and presumptuous questions. For who are we, that we should require the God of heaven to justify to us the wisdom and propriety of his dispensations? We should adore and embrace the mercy which is offered to us through the Saviour, rather than dispute about it. His manifestation in the flesh, no doubt, was seasonable: nay, the Scripture asserts that he died “in due time,” and that he

came "in the fulness of time."* Some reasons may be assigned why the great event did not take place sooner :

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

2. That a long series of clear and circumstantial prophecies might be delivered, and fulfilled in him. This was a wise and gracious appointment ; for the Gospel has thereby received an abundant strength of evidence. It pleased God, in almost every age from the beginning, to raise up and inspire faithful men to proclaim the coming of a Redeemer, and to describe his character and office. Accordingly, they foretold, with

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

an astonishing exactness, his birth, life, and death, and the various incidents relating to them ; and from their united testimony, compared with that of the Evangelists, we are furnished with incontestable arguments in support of the truth. They “ spake, as they were moved by the Holy Ghost,” and have left us no reasonable cause to doubt that JESUS is the CHRIST.

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

* Dan. ii. and vii.

every thing was accommodated to the purpose, when Jesus, "the Desire of all nations,"* appeared.

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

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

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

1. You, who love the Saviour, or who feel your need of him, draw near, that you may admire his excellency and perfection. How great is his glory! How astonishing his condescension! How rich, and free, and extensive, is his mercy! How firm the covenant which he hath sealed with his blood, and confirmed by his oath! Let us join our testimony, and say, that he is "full of grace and truth." Is there not enough in him to dispel your fears, to encourage and enliven your hopes? And will not the belief of what he has done for you constrain you to devote yourselves to him? You know him not, unless you feel an irresistible force in this argument. Do you esteem the world, then, poor

* Hagg. ii. 7.

and worthless, in comparison of Christ? O, turn away your eyes from beholding vanity † Come, and contemplate his perfect beauty, till you can say, He is to me “ the chiefest among ten thousand, and altogether lovely.”*

2. You, who glory in yourselves, and not in the Saviour,—who depend not upon his merit, but your own,—consider what you are doing. What a contempt do you show for this divine Person, and his gracious undertaking! You act as if all this wondrous plan had been entirely needless; for, if your moral qualities and works of righteousness be sufficient to recommend you to the favour of Heaven, then, doubtless, the incarnation as well as the death of Christ was vain. † Then the counsels of God have been employed about a fruitless design; and his Providence has been contriving and executing an absurd, because an useless, scheme. But this you would not assert. And, if you allow the necessity of such an interposition, how wretched, how desperate, must be your case, which required it! Let the conviction have its proper influence! Under a sense of your guilt, bow before the Redeemer, and implore the benefits of his salvation: “ Lord, save us: we perish!” ‡

3. You, who are despisers of Christ, or who disregard, at least, the important doctrine of his manifestation in the flesh, consider the grounds of your objections, or your inattention to it. We entreat your

* Sol. Song v. 10, 16. † Gal. ii. 21.

‡ Matt. viii. 25.

serious examination of these things; and ask why you should turn away your ears from them. You are curious to hear what is uncommon and wonderful; eager to read any eventful history of men and empires; and always at leisure to listen to the trifling news of the day. And is there nothing in this subject which deserves your notice? Or how can you acquit yourselves of the most consummate folly, if you are indifferent about it?

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

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

* John iii. 19, 20.

† Heb. i. 1—3.

not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God.”*

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

* John iii. 18.

† Isa. xii, 2.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. II.

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

IT was an astonishing event, that the glorious Personage, who is called “the Word of God,” “was made flesh, and dwelt among us.” But our wonder is increased when we consider the circumstances of his appearance and abode on the earth. They were such as we should have thought unsuitable to his dignity, inasmuch as there was no display of external splendour, which could excite the notice of the world. “He had no form nor comeliness,” such as men admire; and

“ there was no beauty” in him, which would induce a carnal heart “ to desire him.” Had the whole contrivance of this amazing plan been left to us, we should, probably, have ordered matters very differently, and have had, not a poor, despised, suffering Redeemer, but, what the Jews wished for, a temporal Messiah, who should possess supreme dominion, dazzle the eyes of every observer by his pomp and magnificence, and constrain all the nations of the earth to bow with unfeigned subjection to him. It was otherwise appointed by the unerring wisdom of God ; and, so far from being offended at the mean appearance of Jesus, we should contemplate with profound adoration its gracious purposes.

Yet it is said, “ we beheld his glory.”* There resided a glory in him, which his people discovered, and which sometimes broke forth to the confusion of his enemies ; a glory far superior to all the grandeur of conquerors and kings. Indeed there was a wonderful contrast in the various circumstances which attended the Saviour’s abode on earth ; for the most exalted dignity and the deepest abasement were united in him. Such a Messiah the ancient prophecies describe, and therefore such an one the Jews ought to have expected. They might have learned that “ the Holy One of Israel,” and the afflicted suffering Messiah, was the same Redeemer. May all our prejudices against him be removed ; and, while we hear of his coming in the flesh, may we be disposed to receive him into our hearts,

* John i. 14.

and with loud hosannas welcome his approach, crying, "Blessed be he that cometh in the name of the Lord : Hosanna in the highest !" We consider, for the present,

1. His miraculous Conception.—This, as well as some other incidents preceding his nativity, demands our regard. We have already seen that the providence of God had made great preparations for him, and that the various predictions of the inspired writers had raised among the Jews a general expectation of a glorious Deliverer. Those who studied the sacred oracles, and carefully observed the state of their nation, could not but perceive that the exact period marked out both by Jacob and Daniel for the appearance of SHILOH, MESSIAH, THE PRINCE, must be near at hand.* They were, therefore, "looking for redemption in Israel," and at last they obtained the object of their hope. At the appointed season, "in the fulness of time," the Saviour was announced.

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

* Gen. xlix. 10. Dan. ix. 25.

† Heb. vii. 26.

told by the Prophet Isaiah, that "a VIRGIN should conceive and bear a son, and should call his name IMMANUEL.*

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

A pious female of the house and lineage of David, espoused, but not then joined in marriage, to Joseph, a descendant of the same family, Mary the blessed Virgin, was appointed to be the mother of the Saviour: an honour which many holy women in Israel had aspired to for ages before.† Both she and her expected husband were placed in a mean situation; but they possessed a peculiar excellency of character, and obtained the notice of Heaven. The Lord passed by the mighty, the noble, and the learned of the earth, and poured contempt upon all worldly pageantry, when he submitted to appear in the lowest rank, and to be born of so poor and obscure a person. Yet, even upon that occasion, his dignity and glory were displayed. One of the highest order of the celestial spirits, Gabriel, was commissioned to inform the pious virgin of the counsels of God concerning her, and to declare the name and the office of that illustrious Offspring which she was to pro-

* Isa. vii. 14.

† Luke i. 18, 26—56.

duce by a miraculous conception through the energy of the Holy Ghost. "Behold," said he, "thou shalt conceive in thy womb and bring forth a Son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the highest; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David; and He shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there shall be no end."

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

Here, then, we contemplate the son of God, "made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law."† This is "the Seed of the woman," who was appointed to "bruise the ser-

* Matt. i. 18—25.

† Gal. iv. 4, 5.

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

Are we suitably affected by the mysterious truth which we maintain, that Jesus, who was the Lord of David, became his Son?|| The conception of the Saviour was the most astonishing event which had ever been known upon the earth before. The first formation of the world may justly excite our wonder; but that is really nothing in comparison of the incarnation, when the Creator stooped to be a creature. What power, what condescension, what grace, are displayed in it! It should not be forgotten, that it was "for us men, and for our salvation, He, by whom all things were made, came down from Heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost, of the Virgin Mary, and was made

* Gen. iii. 15. † xxii. 18. ‡ 2 Sam. vii. 13.

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

|| Matt. xxii. 45.

man.”* Let us study the subject, not with the cold indifference of curiosity or speculation, but with humble and devout affections, till we feel the fire of divine love burning within us, and constraining us to sing aloud with Mary, “ My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in GOD MY SAVIOUR.”† We proceed to consider,

II. His Nativity.—All things, it should seem, were in a state of readiness and preparation for his introduction into the world, excepting one circumstance. An ancient prophecy had determined that the Messiah should be born in Beth-lehem; and Mary dwelt at Nazareth, which was at no small distance.‡ How, then, shall that Scripture be fulfilled? The providence of God can easily remove the greatest apparent difficulties, and, in a mysterious way, make all creatures subservient to his own purposes. We do not observe that Mary contrived or wished to change her residence with a view to the prediction; for, probably, that was not attended to at the time. But the mind of a Heathen prince, though he acted only from political motives, was influenced to accomplish this event. The Roman Emperor Augustus became the instrument of performing the divine counsels,§ for, in consequence of a general enrolment of all the inhabitants of Judea, which he had commanded, they were obliged to repair to the place where the original inheritance of their

* Nicene Creed.

† Luke i. 46, 47.

‡ Mic. v. 2. Matt. ii. 5. John vii. 42. § Luke ii. 1, &c.

families lay. Joseph and Mary, then, in obedience to the edict, went to Beth-lehem, the city of David, as being his descendants, where their names were to be registered : and, during their continuance in that town, for so it had been ordered by the appointment of Heaven, the proper season of her delivery came.

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

Let not then the followers of the Lamb be anxious about their present circumstances, considering the mean and ignoble state in which their Lord appeared. It is probable that the poorest of them meet with better accommodations than he did. Yet do we not discover in some an eagerness, which is unsuitable to their character, to procure the pomps and vanities of the world ; and in others a peevish discontent, because they cannot obtain them? Surely you are not conformed to Jesus Christ, if his birth has not taught you to look with indifference on the splendour of the great, and to be satisfied with the lowest situation. Do “ ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye

through his poverty might be rich?"* You must learn from this example to restrain your desires, and to "be content with such things as ye have."†

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

* 2 Cor. viii. 9.

† Heb. xiii. 5.

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

What effect, then, should these "good tidings of great joy" produce in your minds? How did the shepherds receive them? They delayed not to inquire after the new-born Saviour; they went with haste to Bethlehem, where they found the report concerning him to be true. The information, also, which had astonished them, they communicated to others, and gave praise to the God of Israel, who had manifested to them such peculiar mercy. And shall not you, who hear so frequently of the coming of Jesus Christ, desire to know him? Will you refuse to give an immediate attention

to the message of the Gospel? What is there of equal importance? Will you not examine, at least, the intelligence which is brought you? The facts are so well authenticated, that they will bear the most exact scrutiny.

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

In pursuing the history of Jesus, we consider;

III. His Childhood and Education.—We are lost in astonishment, while we contemplate Him, who is "the Lord from Heaven," in all the weakness of infancy,

* 1 John iv. 14.

requiring a mother's watchful care, and carried in a nurse's arms. He passed through the various stages of human life, and experienced every infirmity to which we are subject, sin only excepted.

As he was "made of a woman," that he might be obedient to the law,* he submitted to all the Mosaic rites, and accordingly was circumcised on the eighth day. At the appointed time, also, he was presented to the Lord, by his parents, in the temple at Jerusalem, and even redeemed, as the divine precept required.† He came "to fulfil all righteousness;" and has taught us, by his example, not to despise or neglect the ordinances of God, though, as external observances, they may seem unprofitable and vain.

We have remarked, that the blessed angels joined in concert to celebrate his nativity: and now we shall perceive, that there were not wanting chosen witnesses among the inhabitants of the earth, whose voice should more publicly and more widely proclaim the consecrated Infant. When, therefore, he was presented to God, according to those ancient prophecies, "The desire of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with glory;" and "The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple;"‡ Simeon, an aged saint, who "waited for the Consolation of Israel," through the immediate influence of the Spirit attended at the solemnity, and made known the event. He embraced the holy Infant in his arms, and cried out, with the most devout and

* Gal. iv. 4. † Exod. xiii. 2. Numb. viii. 16, 17. xviii. 15, 16.

‡ Hag. ii. 7. Mal. iii. 1.

lively sentiments of faith, love, and joy, " Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word ; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation." He foretold also the different effects of his appearance, observing, that it would excite general opposition ; and, though to some it would be the means of a happy restoration, would bring upon many final and aggravated ruin. Another person, likewise, a pious female, far advanced in years, confirmed the testimony. " One Anna, a prophetess, coming in that instant, gave thanks unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem."

How much may we learn from this account ! Is it not as necessary for us, as for the ancient Jews, to look for redemption ? And shall we not feel and express the most ardent gratitude and joy for the revelation of the Messiah ? Though we are not favoured with a sight of his bodily presence, yet, if, by faith, we behold his glory, we also shall smile at the prospect of death, and be satisfied to close our eyes upon every earthly object. But, alas ! is not Jesus, according to the prediction, " a sign," which is every where " spoken against ?" To how many is he " a stone of stumbling, and rock of offence !" Even to this day, by the preaching of his Gospel, " the thoughts of many hearts are revealed," for therein he affords a test or trial of men's characters and dispositions. The humble penitent is comforted by the declarations of his abundant grace ; the sensualist discovers his own vile affections, while he determines that he will not follow Christ ; and the Pharisee betrays his

pride and hypocrisy, in refusing "to submit to the righteousness of God."

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

* Matt. ii. 1, &c.

† Psal. lxxviii. 31.

Midian and Ephah : all they from Sheba shall come : they shall bring gold and incense ; and they shall show forth the praises of the Lord.”*

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

But, though such honours were done to Jesus in his very infancy, a violent persecution arose against him, and his life was preserved only through the divine interposition. The cruel tyrant Herod, alarmed by the account of the Magi, as if the new-born King for whom they inquired were to possess temporal dominion, came to the horrid resolution of destroying him. At first he pretended veneration, and a desire to worship him, with a view to accomplish his murderous designs. But the Lord God, who knew the hypocrisy of his heart, defeated his intention, by preventing the wise men from carrying him any intelligence. Unwilling to relinquish his purpose, and enraged by the disappointment, with

* Isa. lx. 5, 6.

great barbarity he commanded all the young children throughout the neighbourhood of Beth-lehem to be put to death. Still Jesus was secure, under an invincible defence ; nor was it possible that the end of his appearing should be frustrated. The Lord directed Joseph to seek a retreat in Egypt, and there the holy family abode till the death of the tyrant.

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

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

When he was twelve years old (and therefore, according to the Jewish custom, was made subject to the law), he went up to the temple with his pious parents to celebrate the passover ; and upon that occasion he

showed the most zealous attachment to the house and service of God. His parents and relations were returning home, while, unknown to them, he still remained at Jerusalem. After a painful search, they found him on the third day amongst the public teachers of religion, listening to their instructions, requesting answers to his inquiries, and, by his profound understanding in divine things, excited the astonishment of all who were present. When his mother had expressed her wonder at his conduct, as having occasioned them many anxious fears, he replied, with a zeal far beyond his years, "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" Yet he did not renounce his obedience to Joseph and Mary, or despise them on account of his own superior rank or abilities; but, with all filial regard and submission to their authority, he went down to dwell with them at Nazareth. There also he continued to exhibit, with his increasing age and stature, an increasing measure of wisdom and excellency of character; for his human nature received gradual communications from the fulness of the Godhead.

Here, then, we have an example which may be proposed to all; the example of a child, which may reprove and shame the most advanced in life. It more especially, however, demands the attention of young persons; therefore we call upon such to contemplate the amiable and holy conduct of Jesus at that early period. Do not the same dispositions which he possessed become you also? And do you, who are only twelve years old, acknowledge your obligations to worship God, and frequent his ordinances? Is the house and service of God

your delight? Jesus undertook a long journey, and, after he had spent many days together in waiting upon God, seemed unwilling to leave the sacred courts. But do not you think the least trouble, for any religious purposes, more than enough; and the shortest time too long? Have you not said "What a weariness is it? When will the sabbath be gone?" Are the grand subjects of divine revelation your study, or the matter of your humble and diligent inquiry? Do you listen with eagerness to the instructions of your teachers; and would you gladly embrace an opportunity of conversing with them for your own edification? Have you considered, that you also, as well as Jesus, should "be about your Father's business?" Or are you consulting His will, and seeking His glory? Ah! how different are the greater part of our young people! What ignorance and contempt of God, what a profane neglect of his house, his word, and ministers, do we discover in them!

If the ordinances of religion be despised, we need not wonder that domestic duties are disregarded. If you feel no reverence towards God, it is not probable that you will honour your father and your mother. And is not your deportment in the family very opposite to that of Jesus? He might have commanded more than twelve legions of angels to attend and obey him; yet he submitted to his poor parents, content to live with them in their state of meanness and indigence, and probably to labour also in the common occupation of a carpenter for his support. But have we not occasion to lament in you an obstinacy of spirit, a contempt of authority, a supercilious behaviour, and an aversion to all

habits of industry? You increase in age and stature; but do you at the same time advance, as Jesus did, in every thing excellent and lovely. Such an improvement, it must be allowed, would be the source of happiness to yourselves, as well as comfort to your parents, and would render you a blessing to society, and an ornament to the profession of the Gospel. Study, then, the example of Christ, till, by the grace of God, you admire and resemble Him. He, who has exhibited himself as the pattern of all holiness, will strengthen you by his Spirit to follow his steps; and if, in this world, you walk as "he walked," you shall hereafter see him in his glory, and reign with him for ever.

J E S U S C H R I S T.

SECT. III.

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

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

We might wish to know many of the private circumstances and juvenile transactions of the Saviour, concerning which we have little or no information. Nothing is told us of that very large proportion of his life which elapsed between his twelfth and his thirtieth

year ; except, in general, that he was subject to his parents ; that, as his stature advanced, he increased in grace and wisdom, and gave early signs of uncommon excellence. Yet during all that period he was hid in obscurity, and removed from the notice of the world ; for he dwelt at Nazareth, a town so mean and so peculiarly infamous, that the question was asked in a proverbial manner, “ Can any good thing come out of Nazareth ? ” * There he passed for the son of a carpenter, and probably laboured at the same low trade with Joseph his reputed father ; for he himself was called “ the carpenter. ” †

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

What amazing condescension is this ! He submitted for a long season to a state of poverty, contempt, and labour. He appeared to be of little benefit to the world, till near thirty years of his life were expired, till but three or four remained for the performance of the errand on which he was sent. Shall any of us, then, complain that we are placed in a low condition, and appointed to a hard and servile employment amongst

* John i. 46. † Mark vi. 3. ‡ John viii. 5.

those who despise and deride us ; and, therefore, that our sphere of usefulness is very contracted ? While we behold Jesus in “ the form of a servant,” let us be satisfied with our lot ; rather let us be ashamed of harbouring a murmuring thought.

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

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

* Heb. x. 7.

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

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

According to the common Era, A.D. 27. Amongst the great multitudes who resorted to John, Jesus himself came from Nazareth to the banks of the river Jordan to be baptized of him.† The Baptist would gladly have declined the office, from a sense of his own extreme

* Litany.

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

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

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

You allow, perhaps, the administration of baptism; if not that of John (which is not contended for), yet that of Christ, which is designed to be a standing ordinance in the church to the end of time. But do you consider that you have need to be baptized, not with the mere element of water only, but with the Holy Ghost, with "the washing of regeneration," that "sprinkling of clean water," by which God "will cleanse you from all your filthiness?" We enter not here into the controversy (which has been so warmly maintained, on both sides, as to prove an unprofitable and hurtful disputation) concerning the proper mode

and subjects of Christian baptism. But we address you as having been, by this solemnity, devoted to the service of Christ; and we call upon you to remember the obligations which it has laid you under. By this sacrament you are joined to the armies of the faithful, and are bound "to fight manfully under the banner of Christ against sin, the world, and the devil, and to continue Christ's faithful soldier and servant unto your life's end."* The vows of the Lord, then, are upon you. And have you not perfidiously violated these engagements? You should be reminded that the external rite of baptism, though ever so scripturally administered, will avail you nothing, if you are not "washed from your filthiness," and have not now the "answer of a good conscience towards God."†

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

* Office of Baptism.

† 1 Pet. iii. 21.

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

If we, also, be solicitous to obtain for ourselves a testimony of the favour of Heaven, let us learn from our Lord to expect it in answer to fervent prayer. And we may be the more emboldened to present our supplications in the name of Jesus, since, as we have seen, he is consecrated to and accepted in his mediatorial office. The residue of the Spirit is with him; for "he has received gifts for men." We may rejoice and triumph that the Father is well pleased in him, as our Surety and our Advocate. But are we likewise, as we ought to be, well pleased with him? Are we not backward even to credit his declarations, though confirmed by such a fulness of evidence, and unwilling to acquiesce in his gracious purposes for our salvation? Why do we not feel the most ardent affection towards

him, and say, "This is my Beloved, and this is my Friend?"* Can we consider the work of mercy which he came to perform, the rich benefits which he bestows, the excellency and perfection of his person and character, and then say, "There is no beauty, that we should desire him?"† This contemptuous disregard and rejection of him would betray an extreme baseness of disposition, which must be utterly inexcusable.

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

II. His Fasting.—Before he went forth to the exercise of his public ministry, and with a view, probably, to improve in his private devotions the late solemnity of his baptism, he retired from society. "He was in the wilderness,"‡ a desert part of Judea, full of high and rugged mountains, the very appearances of which were dismal, and calculated to impress the mind with terror. In this gloomy retreat "he was with the wild beasts," exposed, as it should seem, to their furious assaults; but, like the lions in Daniel's den, they were restrained from violence, and obliged to acknowledge the power and presence of their Lord and Maker. Here he continued, in a total forbearance of food, for the space of forty days and forty nights together, that

* Cant. v. 16.

† Isa. liii. 2.

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

his whole attention might be given to meditation and prayer.

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

avoid solitude, and know not how to employ themselves alone.

But what have we to do with fasting? It is allowed there have been those, as in the church of Rome, who enforced and practised it with the utmost degree of superstition. But we, of the present day, are in danger, not so much from superstition, as from licentiousness. It is granted, also, that it were presumptuous in us to attempt a total abstinence for forty days. But shall we therefore say that it is in no case incumbent upon us to fast at all? The ancient saints thought it expedient and necessary; since, upon most of their solemn occasions, they joined fasting and prayer together. Undoubtedly, persons of different constitutions cannot be confined within the same precise limits in the forbearance of food. A regard should be had to circumstances, and the great purposes of devotion constantly kept in view. We should humble ourselves before God, and acknowledge that we have forfeited our daily bread. This may tend to "mortify our members, which are upon the earth,"* and to subdue in us the evil affections of pride, anger, covetousness, and lust: and, while every indulgence is denied to the body, the immortal spirit may be much less oppressed, and drawn up the more to high and heavenly things. These ends could not be answered in our Lord; but we must be strangely ignorant of ourselves not to allow that in these respects we have abundant cause for humiliation and self-denial. Yet why do we talk of fasting, since

* Col. iii. 5.

most men plead for, and demand, the full gratification of all their sensual appetites? The very mention of mortification is laughed at as the weakness of enthusiasm and the madness of superstition; while profaneness, intemperance, and riot; almost every where prevail and triumph. Few, therefore, can sincerely join with us in the Collect of our church, and say, "O Lord, who for our sake didst fast forty days and forty nights, give us grace to use such abstinence, that our flesh being subdued to the Spirit, we may ever obey thy godly motions in righteousness and true holiness, to thy honour and glory!"*

Our Lord underwent a far more severe trial in the wilderness, as a necessary preparation for his mediatorial office. This will appear in considering,

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

The onset was made upon Jesus soon after his baptism, and the effusion of the Spirit upon him. And, in general, we shall feel the effects of Satan's malice

* First Sunday in Lent.

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

We may also remark the place in which our Lord endured the conflict: it was "the wilderness." No situation, indeed, will secure us from the assaults of our malicious adversary. In vain should we fly to deserts or to cells; we should be still exposed. Even though we be devoutly employed in meditation and prayer, as we have intimated, we are liable to an attack. Nay, retirement itself, in some views, may give an additional force to temptation. Perhaps the wilderness was therefore chosen for this singular engagement, in which the fiend was allowed to exert his utmost rage; the very horrors of the scene favoured his vile purpose. "Jesus was led up of the Spirit," by the peculiar impulse of the Holy Ghost, with which he was then filled, "to be tempted of the devil." Confident of his own superior strength, he dreaded not the combat: nor have we any real cause to fear, when called out to

* Ecclus. ii. 1.

the same warfare, if we depend on his mighty arm for protection and support. But let us beware of presumption. Remembering our own weakness, and the power of our enemy, let us pray continually, "Lead us not into temptation."

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

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

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

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

It would have been easy for our Lord to accomplish what Satan proposed; but he would not even seem to distrust the care of Providence; and he has left us an example of a firm reliance upon God in the severest difficulties. He replied therefore from the Scriptures, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God."* Thus he has taught us to be more anxious to obtain the divine blessing than a supply of food, which of itself can administer no nutriment to the body. We should not dare to pursue any unlawful course, or take one step

* Deut. viii. 3.

out of the road of duty, for the providing even of necessary support. Let us preserve our dependence upon the God of heaven, who in a thousand ways can give us bread to eat, or even sustain us without it.

2. Jesus was then tempted to presumption. "The devil taketh him up into the holy city," (in what way we do not inquire, nor is it necessary to know) "and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple." Here again the address was most artful : he urged him to presume upon his relation to God, in the belief of which he could not be shaken, to make an improper display of it, and to expect protection without a sufficient warrant. "If thou be the Son of God," said he, "cast thyself down from hence ; for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee to keep thee ; and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone."* Satan, we observe can appeal to Scripture, to serve his own purposes ; and his conduct has taught us to be upon our guard against a wrong application of detached passages of the inspired writings ; for texts are frequently quoted in support of the most erroneous sentiments and immoral practices.

In this instance we behold the admirable wisdom of our Lord, wresting the Scripture out of the hands of his adversary, and confounding him with it. He replied, "It is written again, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God."† We are forbidden, then, to prescribe unto God what evidence he shall afford us, or to

* Psal, xci. 11.

† Deut. vi. 16.

presume upon his care over us in that line of conduct which he has not authorized. Yet to this very sin the followers of Christ are generally urged. Indeed, they are in danger from the two opposite extremes; for, if Satan be baffled in one point, he will try another; and therefore it will be an advantage to be apprized of his devices. What though you be the children of God, and can maintain your hope in him? consider well where you venture to set your foot. He is not bound by any promise to comply with your vain wishes, or to preserve you where your proper duty does not call you. Dare not, then, however you may be solicited, to deviate from the right path for the display of your own consequence and abilities; nor fondly imagine that in such a deviation you can be influenced by any true regard to the glory of God.

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

How daring the scheme! how detestable the falsehood which supported it!

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

At length the holy resentment of Jesus was roused; and, giving the tempter to understand that his real character was known, he rejected the proposal with abhorrence: "Get thee behind me, Satan; for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only thou shalt serve."† We learn, then, how to repel the attacks of our enemy. We must possess the ut-

* Mark viii. 36.

† Deut. vi. 13.

most firmness of opposition, and despise every offer of temporal advantage, which might induce us to depart from our God. We must determine to yield no reverence or obedience to any but Him; and then we shall be proof against all the enticements of the world.

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

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

* James iv. 7.

† Eph. vi, 17.

to answer and repel every suggestion with, "It is written."

But here, also, are exhibited the grace and tenderness of our Redeemer. How astonishing the humiliation to which he submitted! Painful to himself, yet most salutary in its consequences to us! Now we are assured that "he is able to succour you who are tempted,"* that he is "touched with the feeling of your infirmities,"† and that he "will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able, but will with the temptation also make a way to escape."‡ Yes, in due time you shall triumph over all the malice of your enemies. The victory of Jesus was an earnest of victory to his people. "The God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly."§ Angels are anxiously observing your conduct. In the view of such witnesses, "stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong,"|| and soon they will congratulate you on having obtained a glorious and everlasting conquest.

But are not many unacquainted with this spiritual warfare? If you make no resistance, but willingly comply with the solicitations of Satan, you may escape some of the difficulties which the Christian soldier meets with. All may seem to be peace with you: but the reason is, the prince of darkness holds his palace in your hearts; and, while you allow

* Heb. ii. 18.

† vi. 15.

‡ 1 Cor. x. 13.

§ Rom. xvi. 20.

|| 1 Cor. xvi. 13.

him the possession, he will not disturb you. But you are no other than his vassals, "led captive by him at his will. We entreat you to arise, and assert your liberty: for to what tremendous consequences will a continuance in your present bondage lead! Cry mightily to God, that he would rescue you from it, "deliver you from the power of darkness, and translate you into the kingdom of his dear Son."

* Col. i. 13.

J E S U S C H R I S T.

SECT. IV.

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

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

We have beheld him, at his baptism, publicly anointed and set apart for his great work, on which after his temptation in the wilderness, he prepared to enter. He did not, however, open his ministry at

once, or display his glory by a sudden blaze, but in a gradual manner, as men could bear it.

His familiar companions were few, and those few of no considerable rank in life, taken from common, and not the most creditable, occupations, fishermen tax-gatherers, &c. In the calling and uniting of these to himself, he discovered his power and his grace; and exhibited a specimen of his general conduct through the succeeding ages of the church. Notwithstanding all the wonders he performed, and that fulness of evidence by which he proved his mission and divinity, he would have been universally despised and rejected, had not an almighty influence been exerted, by which the hearts of some were inclined to receive and follow him.* He might have commanded the services of more than twelve legions of angels; and therefore his condescension was the more remarkable in selecting a few obscure persons for his intimate associates and principal agents.

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

* Newton's Eccles. Review, p. 60.

† John i. 28, &c.

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

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

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

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

Here a different character is presented to us. Nathanael, probably, as a sincere worshipper of God, like many others, "waited for the Consolation of Israel;" but, though an upright man, and under the

* Isa. lxxv. 1.

† Psal. cx. 3.

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

strength, and comfort; "for unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance."*

We perceive, through the whole of this history, that the grace of God operates in a sovereign manner. Here were two of a family, three of a city, called to the knowledge and love of Christ, while the greater part, perhaps of their friends and neighbours, remained strangers and enemies to him. Even so it is now. He is confessed, loved, and glorified, by a few persons in a town, and frequently by such as were previously connected together by kindred or acquaintance. These, too, are so opposite to the rest in sentiments, principles, and practice, that "they are men wondered at."† If any should be disposed to ask a reason for this, we have nothing to answer, but cry out in devout admiration, "Even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight." Hence also we observe a variety in the cases of his people; and therefore we should not be forward to condemn any one merely because his religious experience, in some unessential parts, differs from that of another. Let us not arrogantly prescribe unto God, but bow before him, and acknowledge that "the Judge of all the earth will surely do right." Instead of censuring the "diversities of his operations," let us adore the riches of his mercy. If the most disobedient and rebellious be willing to submit unto Jesus, he will graciously receive them. Their misapprehensions, fears, and unbelief, may for a time prevent their recourse to him; but no sooner do they discover a real

* Matt. xxv. 29. † Zech. iii. 8. ‡ Mat. xi. 26.

desire to become his disciples, than he meets them with expressions of his kindness, admits them to a familiar communication with himself, and "fills them with joy and peace in believing."

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

Soon after our Lord's arrival in Galilee, he, and the few disciples whom he had now attached to himself, were invited to a marriage; probably the marriage of a relation, since his mother and some other of his kindred were there.* He was not inattentive to the calls of social life, nor wanting in any offices of respect and kindness to those with whom he was nearly connected. He condescended, therefore, to be present upon that occasion, and to partake of the entertainment. Our church has inferred from this circumstance that "he adorned and beautified the holy estate of matrimony." Doubtless he testified his approbation; nor do his professed followers show any real sanctity, or promote his cause among men, by despising that institution, which is declared to be "honourable in all."† The religion

* John ii. 1, &c.

† Heb. xiii. 4.

of Jesus does not require that moroseness and entire separation from society, into which some weak, but pious, persons have been led, through the fear of conforming to the world. They have made Christianity appear with a gloomy and forbidding aspect, by representing the most temperate convivial meetings as altogether profane, and on this ground refusing to mix with them. Our Lord's example teaches us, not indeed that we may at any time give into rioting and excess, or indulge a light and dissipated spirit, but that it may be right and expedient, on certain occasions, to use a greater freedom of conversation and intercourse with our friends, than our general habits or wishes may allow.

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

* The answer of Jesus to his mother, "WOMAN, what have I to do with thee?" to an English reader may convey the idea of

per season for his interference was not arrived, it is plain, from her injunctions to the servants, that he gave her cause to believe her proposal would soon be complied with.

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

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

harshness and disrespect. That it was meant as some kind of check or reprehension is allowed; but the appellation of "Woman" implied no want of proper regard, since, in those times, and in the Greek language, the same address was usually made by servants to their mistress, and even by subjects to a queen,

* Luke vii. 34.

What will not human depravity pervert? It can turn that into poison which was designed for salutary food. Accordingly, there are those, who have attempted to justify the most flagitious actions from the sacred writings. It almost moves one's indignation that so infamous a reproach should be cast upon the holy Jesus. Is it, then, conceived possible, that he should not only remain in the company of drunkards, but work a miracle for the sake of lengthening out their merriment? What more blasphemous assertion could Satan himself advance? We have no reason to conclude but that every thing in this meeting was conducted with the utmost decency and temperance, and that our Lord improved the opportunity for the spiritual instruction and edification of the guests. In his conversation on the most private occasions, can any instance be adduced which can vindicate or encourage, we need not say a licentiousness of manners, but even a trifling gaiety of mind? The "lovers of pleasures" will gain no advantage by appealing to his conduct, but only betray their own deformity upon a comparison of themselves with his perfect excellence.

The misrepresentation seems to have arisen from that address to the bridegroom; "Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine; and, when men have well drunk, then that which is worse; but thou hast kept the good wine until now." This, however, describes merely what was usual at entertainments, and has not any necessary reference to that particular occasion; or, admitting that it had, it would not

prove that any of the company then assembled were in a state of intoxication. The word itself, rendered **WELL DRUNK**, does not always mean excess; as it is applied by the best authors to cases wherein temperance was observed.

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

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

* Prov. ix. 5.

providence and his grace, we rejoice in his all-sufficient provision and support.

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

Immediately upon his arrival at Jerusalem, he repaired to the temple, where a remarkable transaction occurred. Among other profanations of that holy place, the outward court was grossly violated, probably through the covetousness of the priests ; for an open market was held in it, to the disturbance of devout worshippers. The service of God might be urged in excuse, as the people were here accommodated with their respective offerings. But Jesus felt a pious indignation at the shameful abuse, and set himself to reform it. " When he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove out of the temple" the profane traders, " and the sheep and the oxen ; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables ; and said unto them that sold doves, Take these things hence ; make not my Father's house an house of merchandise." Such an interference of a person who possessed no human authority was singular indeed ! It amounted to no less than a full declaration of his prophetic character, and of his peculiar relation to God.

In this view it will appear proper and consistent, like many of those significant actions of the old prophets, by which, as the messengers of Heaven, they instructed and admonished the people.*

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

Some however, among the Jews, called him to account for this proceeding, and demanded a proof of his divine commission. The very action which he

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

† Psal. lxi. 9.

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

While we profess to be satisfied that Jesus should purge the temple at Jerusalem from profane attendants, let us ask, Are we such worshippers as he will approve ? Is there no violation of the house of God among ourselves ; no irreverence which requires reformation. Is that holy place never turned into " a house of merchandise ?" Are our minds never employed there in settling temporal accounts, and in various schemes of trade, as if we were in the midst of a market ? What, then, would Jesus say, if he were to appear amongst us ? And let us remember, that

* Mark xiv. 58.

“all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do.”* We should endeavour, therefore, to leave the cares of the world at a distance, “that we may attend upon the Lord without distraction.”† “Take these things hence,” for they are most unsuitable to his sacred courts.

Jesus, we have seen, publicly asserted his high character at Jerusalem, and in the midst of many adversaries. He spake with an efficacy, which silenced, at least, if it did not convince, his opposers: but did any truly receive him? Many were so struck with his miracles (which yet are not recorded) that they acknowledged him to be the Messiah, and professed to believe in his name. But they were such as, our Lord perceived, were not to be depended on. There was in them something unsound, or shamefully defective. Either they were false-hearted, with declarations of faith, love, and zeal, waiting only for an opportunity to betray him to his enemies; or else, if sincere, they possessed not a proper firmness and courage, and dared not to stand forth in defence of his cause. Even a friend, who is afraid or ashamed to espouse your interests, is not entitled to your confidence. You will not think yourselves safe in his hands; and therefore, from a proper regard to your own welfare and security, you will be backward to trust him. Such prudence is indispensably necessary in religious as well as temporal concerns. A little experience will teach you not implicitly to rely on every professor. You ought

* Heb. iv. 13.

† 1 Cor. vii. 35.

not, indeed, to suspect hypocrisy in all because you may have found it in some: a jealous temper is inconsistent with Christian love. But a cautious reserve and circumspection, towards many of those who discover an attachment to the Gospel, are highly expedient to protect you from various snares. This you will learn from Jesus, when "he did not commit himself unto them" who are said to have "believed in his name."

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

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

it, is not this a meanness and inconsistency, of which you ought to be ashamed before him?

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

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. V.

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

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

Nicodemus, a person of consequence as a magistrate, and a member of the great council, the sanhe-

* John vii. 48.

drim, probably too a man of learning, and, as a Pharisee, exact in all religious observations, paid him a visit : but it is remarked that “ he came by night.”* He might be afraid or ashamed to have it known, aware that a free and open intercourse with Jesus would bring upon him reproach and opposition ; and therefore, to conceal it from public notice, and preserve his reputation, he took advantage of the privacy which is afforded by the darkness of evening. But, allowing that he was under a very improper influence of the fear of man, he was not thereby prevented from applying to this divine Instructor for information in the truth. Our Lord, who never rejected or discouraged a sincere inquirer, overlooking or not upbraiding his weakness, received him with kindness, and with freedom declared the most important mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. He constantly spoke with a regard to the circumstances and dispositions of his audience, and opened the Gospel, more or less, as they could bear it. Here was no scornful captious disputant, but an humble teachable scholar, seeking direction in the way of righteousness. And here we shall find, within a few verses, a more clear and explicit representation of the great system of Christianity, than in any other passage of equal compass, throughout the four Evangelists. It is recorded for our benefit, and every particle of it concerns each of us as much as it did Nicodemus himself. May we, like him, be willing to sit at the feet of Jesus, and hear his words, “ which are able to make us wise unto salvation !”

* John iii. 1, &c.

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

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

I. The nature and necessity of regeneration,—This being the first thing which our Lord insisted on, we conclude that the doctrine lies at the very foundation of Christianity. “We know,” said Nicodemus, “that thou art a Teacher come from God ; for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.” Such an address, acknowledging that Jesus was a Prophet divinely commissioned, implied a desire of receiving instruction from him. Without any preface or apology, the Saviour began to explain the religion which he came to set up, and with peculiar solemnity declared an entire renovation of mind to be universally and indispensably requisite: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” As if he had said, “Dost thou believe I am come from God? Then I, the faithful Witness, assert this great truth. Dost thou inquire after the kingdom of God? Be assured that none can

be a member of it, who is not so totally transformed in his inward dispositions, as to become a new creature."

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

We are aware that much pains are taken, not to deny our Lord's assertion, for that is express, but by subtlety and refinement to explain away its meaning. "To be born again," it is said, is only a strong eastern metaphor, which implies a renunciation of former errors, whether Jewish or Pagan, and a profession of Christianity. Let us try this interpretation by other passages. "Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world."* And can such a conquest be ascribed to every one who is called a Christian? We have continual and lamentable proof to the contrary.

* 1 John v. 4.

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

It is said, then, that “to be born again” is to reform the life, and pay an exact regard to the duties of morality. This, we grant, is highly expedient and necessary, and is an effect which will flow from regeneration ; but it may, in some measure, be produced without it. For do not many “make the outside clean, whose inward part is full of wickedness ?”† But the change of which we speak originates within, and is properly a renovation of the heart, in which corrupt and carnal affections are subdued, holy spiritual desires and tempers are implanted. It is, therefore, “a new creation,” so that the man is, as it were, made over again, not as to his body, which suffers no alteration, but as to the dispositions of the mind : his depraved nature is rectified. The language is metaphorical, we allow ; and

* 1 John v. 18.

† Luke xi. 39.

who ever denied it? but some meaning was intended to be conveyed in the figure, and certain modern explanations have subtilized it into nothing. If Jesus designed only to inculcate an external reformation of conduct and regularity of morals, he used expressions too strong, or, at best, very dark and intricate, which perplex rather than instruct. On this interpretation the metaphor is absurd, and all the solemnity of our Lord's address mere trifling; for he has rendered that obscure which in plain words would have been easily understood. Had this been the sense, Nicodemus would not have wondered; nor would Jesus have spoken of it as a mysterious doctrine.

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

* Job. xiv. 4.

the offspring of fallen man must universally partake of his depravity. But the Holy Ghost communicates to the soul a new and divine nature, which resembles that blessed Agent in purity and goodness.

None, therefore, should put off the subject to others, as if it were requisite only for gross and abandoned sinners to be born again. Would you say, Why should I be disturbed about the matter, since my conduct is regular, my dealings fair, and my tempers amiable? You forget, surely, that we all spring from the same corrupt original. The necessity of regeneration arises not from the peculiar circumstances in which some men may be placed, or the degree of guilt they may have contracted, but from the degeneracy of human nature itself, which we all, without exception, equally partake of, though different persons may discover it in different ways. Probably you cannot explain the mode in which the effects of the fall are transmitted to us, for the subject does not accord with "philosophy and vain deceit:" yet our Lord expressly declares, that, upon our first entrance into the world, we bring with us a carnal principle, which is opposite to God; and surely the universal condition of the human race is enough to prove that there is not one who does not feel a strong propensity to evil. This being granted, it follows, at once, "We must be born again."

Without such a renewal of the mind, we shall remain in a state of alienation from God, and therefore can have no part in the Messiah's kingdom of grace. That being a kingdom of righteousness, those only, who are changed into the divine likeness, can relish its holy

and spiritual precepts. Neither can we enter into the kingdom of glory, so long as we continue under the influence of "the flesh," which is "enmity against God." We are thereby unfitted for maintaining communion with him: he cannot admit us into his presence with such a disposition; nor can heaven itself afford any enjoyment of happiness.

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

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

II. The operation of the Spirit in producing the change. Many are not properly aware of their own inability, and therefore, with great earnestness, and strong resolutions of amendment, themselves under-

take the work, for which they are utterly unfit. The consequence can be no other than repeated and painful disappointments. Their plans fail ; their purposes are broken : temptations prevail against them ; so that they “labour in the very fire.” Confusion and despair must ensue, unless they are willing to be indebted to the God of all grace, and cry to him for help. Then he will arise for their deliverance, and make his own strength perfect in their weakness.

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

* John i. 13. iii. 5. 1 John v. 1.

† Eph. ii. 10. ‡ ii. 4, 5.

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

We attend not to metaphysical subtleties and refinements, nor attempt to explain the mode in which the Holy Ghost performs his operations. But, not dreading the charge of enthusiasm, we maintain that, without his powerful interposition and continual assistance, we cannot be Christians indeed. The subject is mysterious; there is a secret in it which God hath thought proper to conceal; which, therefore, it is not needful, or perhaps possible, for us to know. Is this urged as an objection? Recollect that the doctrine was repre-

* Psal. li. 10 † Phil. ii. 12, 13. ‡ Psal. lxxii. 12.

sented to Nicodemus in this very light: our Lord taught him to expect the same difficulties in grace which occur in creation. "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth." Thus the Spirit acts upon the human mind in a sovereign and unsearchable manner; we cannot direct or control his influence; and, though we clearly discern his effects, it would baffle all our understandings to trace and explain the methods and reasons of his operations. The subject may appear to be involved in so many and great difficulties, that our faith may stagger, and we may cry out with Nicodemus, "How can these things be?" But if we sincerely desire instruction, he, who condescended to the ignorance and prejudices of that "Master of Israel," will have compassion on our weakness, and "guide us into all truth."

Such is the pride of man, he is not content to "know in part;" and hence frequently the vain pretender to right reason rejects the grand doctrines of revelation, when he finds in them unfathomable depths. But let us remember "the certainty of those things wherein we have been instructed," and on whose authority we have received them. "Verily, verily," says our divine Teacher, "We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen; and ye receive not our witness." There are matters still further removed from our comprehension; and if already we are disposed to object, "how shall we believe, if he tell us of heavenly things?" Yet how shall we controvert his testi-

mony? "No man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man, which is in heaven." He declared himself, then, to be in heaven, at the very moment he was conversing with Nicodemus upon earth. And if we admit this account, why not admit, what is not more unintelligible, the influence of the Spirit in regenerating, and sanctifying the soul?

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

III. The deliverance of sinners from condemnation through his gracious interposition. This doctrine should be considered in connexion with that already established; for it is a part of the same glorious plan; and the one is as interesting to us as the other. The foundation of both is laid in man's fallen condition; for, if that could be disproved, the whole system would be shaken, and fall to the ground together. We are aware that it is an offensive truth, but we are compelled by the strongest conviction to maintain that "we were by nature the children of wrath;"* and it is clearly implied in our Lord's address to Nicodemus; for, while he opened the grand scheme of divine mercy, he evidently argued upon the supposition that we are in a state of ruin, obnoxious to justice. Thus, when he asserted "that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life," did he not plainly intimate

* Eph. ii. 3.

that all, considered only in themselves, without the remedy proposed, are liable to perish for ever? From the very grace offered through the Saviour we infer that the whole human species, without excepting a single instance, stand in need of redemption; and that there is such depravity in their nature, as without restraint would infallibly lead them to final destruction. "God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved." Now, where would have been the peculiar mercy of forbearing to execute the sentence of wrath, if we had not deserved it? or of preventing the misery into which we are not likely to fall? Let us enter deeply into this important truth, without which the Gospel will be no more to us than an entertaining story; it may furnish amusement, but will not promote our salvation. Are we affected as we ought to be with a conviction of our guilt and danger? What plea can we offer in arrest of judgment? Let us thankfully accept the proposal of deliverance, and urge with our offended God the mediation of his own Son.

The dispensation of grace is here fully opened to Nicodemus. God is represented as looking down in compassion on our ruined race, and, through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, effecting redemption. He interposed not from any view of merit in us, or the expectation of receiving a recompense; but we are taught to ascribe our rescue to his own sovereign, free, and abundant mercy. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son." Well may we exclaim with the Apostle, in devout admiration, "Herein

is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”*

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

We rejoice that he hath made a full atonement by his blood, and therefore we can encourage every

* John iv. 10. † Heb. ix. 22. ‡ x. 4.

trembling penitent to “look unto him and be saved;” because he is “the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.”* If the Lord God should deal with you according to the strictness of his righteous law, your condemnation would be just and unavoidable. But the Gospel proclaims mercy to all, without exception, who feel and deplore their own wretchedness. Refuse not the gracious tender, for “whosoever believeth—shall not perish, but have everlasting life.” To suppose that your application to Jesus will not succeed, is to cast a foul reproach upon him, as if he meant not what he said, or could not make good his own assurances. Give an unreserved credit to his word, and plead his name in a confident expectation of obtaining reconciliation with your God.

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

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

* Isa. xlv. 22. John i, 29.

Such as fix their entire regard on Jesus, and derive all their expectations of pardon and salvation from him, while they "abhor themselves, and repent in dust and ashes," are immediately received into the divine favour, however numerous or aggravated their iniquities have been. The sentence of the law, to which they would otherwise have been exposed, has now lost all its force : the Lord himself looks on them with delight, and will preserve them to his heavenly kingdom. "He that believeth on him is not condemned." How gracious the declaration ! What a firm foundation for our hopes ! What a continual source of comfort ! Christians, should it not draw forth your warmest gratitude and love, and excite you to holy diligence and zeal ? Why should you now be terrified or distressed by any occurrence ? Depending on the assurance of your Redeemer, with devout admiration say, "O Lord, I will praise thee : though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortedst me."*

How different the case of unbelievers ! Possibly they may assume certain specious appearances of virtue, and pretend a high regard to morality ; yet, not being impressed with any deep conviction of sin, they have no true value of the Saviour, and refuse him the submission he requires. On that ground, they will perish eternally. Since faith in the Son of God is the only appointed means of deliverance from condemnation, all who are destitute of this principle, whatever else they may plead, remain under the sentence of death. In-

* Isa. xli. 1.

deed, without any consideration of their contempt and rejection of the Gospel, as transgressors of the divine law they have incurred the threatened penalty; and who shall acquit them? Jesus Christ "was manifested to take away our sins;" but they can receive no benefit from that grace which they despise. Nay, this very circumstance aggravates their guilt, and not only ensures their punishment, but will increase their misery for ever. "He that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God." Unbelief; therefore, is an offence peculiarly heinous, and more destructive than any other, as it effectually bars the door of mercy.

Various objections are urged against this representation. It is said that, while faith is insisted on as the only point of distinction, the grand criterion by which the states of men will be finally determined, we derogate from the holiness and justice of God, as if he paid no regard to their moral characters. We reply, that none possess any moral excellence in themselves, previous to their acceptance with God on the terms of the Gospel. But the grace of God produces a difference; and such a difference as proves that he acts agreeably to his own perfections, both when he saves and when he condemns. This is the description here given by our Lord himself.

Sinners will be judged for their contemptuous neglect of means afforded them; and it will be found that the real cause of their rejection of the Saviour is a rooted aversion to that purity of heart and conduct

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

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

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

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

* Heb. iii. 12,

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. VI.

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

“**J**ESUS hath left us an example, that we should follow his steps.”* It will, therefore, be necessary for us to contemplate this illustrious pattern with serious attention, that according to our measure we may copy after it. “He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also to walk, even as he walked.”† Among other particulars, which are proposed for our imitation, his unwearied diligence and zeal, in accomplishing the grand object of his mission, were very remarkable. His ministry, though contracted within narrow limits, was most laborious. For the last three years and a half, which is supposed to include the whole of his public life, he travelled much, and preached often; and

* 1 Pet. ii. 21.

† John ii. 6.

that too with great fatigue both of body and mind. If we accompany him from place to place, we shall observe him constantly intent upon his work, foregoing his own ease and temporal comfort, and cheerfully meeting extreme sufferings, that he might be useful. In one word, "he went about doing good."*

Have we nothing to learn from this description? Is it not likewise incumbent upon us to be active, for the short season we may continue here? And should we not desire, not so much to live long, as to fill up our portion of time, whatever it may be, in an honourable and profitable manner? If we have the mind of Christ, we shall eagerly seize every opportunity, wherever we may travel, to glorify God, and promote the salvation of our fellow-creatures; and those we shall account good journeys indeed, which have contributed to the conversion of a sinner. But, alas! they, who follow the Saviour most closely, still remain at a great distance from him. Even his faithful servants may justly be covered with confusion, when they think how little they possess of his diligence, self-denial, fortitude, and zeal. How preposterous are sloth and sensuality in those who are called by his name!

It is probable that our Lord continued at Jerusalem, and in the neighbouring parts of Judea, for some months after his conferences with Nicodemus. But at length, his popularity having rendered him offensive to the Pharisees, he judged it expedient to retire from their observation. He therefore removed to Galilee

* Acts x. 38.

for his own safety, yet keeping in view the great object of his mission.* A prudent attention to our own security, when we are exposed to the assaults or stratagems of enemies, is in no respect inconsistent with religious fidelity and courage. We should not shrink from danger, when we meet it in the path of duty; but in every other case to hazard our lives is rashness and presumption.

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

When he approached to the city Sychar (probably the same as Sychem in the Old Testament), being exhausted with his long journey, he sent his disciples into the town to buy food, and himself sat down weary, hungry, and thirsty, by a noted place called "Jacob's well." Thus it appeared that he was very man, partaker of our weaknesses, and subject to our natural wants and infirmities, since he stood in need of a cup of water to refresh him. Just at that time a woman of

* John iv. 1, &c.

† Dr. Prid. Connect. Part 1. Book 6.

Samaria drew near, whose necessities had led her to the well ; and Jesus solicited her assistance to quench his thirst. This was not the whole of his intent, but served chiefly as an introduction to his main design of saving her precious soul, and making her an instrument of his glory. How great is his condescension, how tender his compassion, who waits not for the application of sinners, but meets and prevents them with his goodness!

The woman expressed her surprise at his address, since such violent prejudices subsisted between the Jews and Samaritans, that they would neither ask nor receive any favours from each other. Ah! what mischiefs spring from a party spirit! How often does it obstruct all religious and social intercourse between those who are connected by the closest ties! Jesus, however, passing over the dispute between the two nations, immediately gave a turn to the discourse, that he might lead her to the knowledge of himself. He intimated that he had far better, even living, water to bestow ; and that, if she had understood his real character, she would have implored this blessing at his hands. Her reply discovered entire ignorance of his meaning ; but Jesus, with an astonishing meekness, bearing with her misapprehensions, explained and confirmed his former assertion. He declared that the water which he proposed to communicate was so superior to the spring before them, that it would effectually and for ever quench the thirst, and be a source of eternal blessedness to the soul. The woman still resting in gross and carnal notions, like Nicodemus on another occasion, considered him as speaking only of common water, endued with some special virtues.

Alas how unapt we are to form any spiritual conceptions! "Our soul cleaveth unto the dust;"* and it is with extreme difficulty that we admit any other ideas than those of earthly objects. On this account, they, whose office it is to teach and to admonish, should be furnished with much patience and forbearance, that they may not be offended or discouraged when their words are misunderstood. Though one method of instruction fails, another should be attempted. It will be peculiarly proper, in order to convey religious truth with good effect, to aim at the consciences of the audience, and endeavour to fix in them a deep conviction of guilt.

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

* Psal. cxix. 25.

† John iv. 29.

subject as her own wickedness, while she acknowledged Jesus to be a Prophet from heaven, she requested information of him touching the principal point in debate between the Jews and Samaritans. The latter retained only a part of the Mosaic law, and even that they had greatly corrupted. They had also erected a temple on Mount Gerizim, in opposition to that at Jerusalem; and each nation contended eagerly for its place, as well as mode, of worship.

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

And did he ever finally leave any humble inquirer in suspense about his character, as the Saviour of the world? Does he not give all necessary information to every one who earnestly implores his direction? Yes, let us be encouraged to ask and wait for his divine teaching: "Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord."* Nay, the grace of Jesus is so large and free, as to surpass all our conceptions. The history before us exhibits it as preventing grace. So far from disdainning this poor, ignorant, bigotted, lewd, and wicked woman, he first made the overture of mercy; or else, it should seem, she would not have sought after him. He is still acting the same kind and condescending part towards sinners of the present day. He sends a message of peace and love to you, and solicits your attention. Your past folly, your heinous iniquities, and inveterate evil habits, will be no objections or difficulties with him. He can instruct; He can pardon; He can sanctify. "Whoremongers and adulterers," so continuing, "God will judge;"† but whoremongers and adulterers may be converted by the grace of Jesus, may become sincere followers of him, and then they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven.

Do we "know the gift of God?" Let us contemplate its excellency and value, till our hearts burn with the most ardent desire that this gift may be ours. Have we drunk of this "living water?" or do we thirst for the refreshing streams? If we retain our

* Hos. vi. 3.

† Heb. xiii. 4.

fondness for the vanities of the world, we are strangers to the "well of life;" for this would have satisfied the soul; this would have made every other enjoyment, in comparison, appear poor and contemptible.

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

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

* Matt. xi. 26.

‡ Luke xiii. 30.

† xxi. 31.

§ 2 Pet. i. 10.

and serve God with inward ardour of devotion, we have not known Jesus, nor rightly understood the design of his appearance.

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

If we, like Jesus, are intent on the duties of our respective offices, we may be disposed, perhaps, on certain occasions, to neglect ourselves. It is not, in-

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

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

eternal glory. Then what anthems of praise, what grateful acclamations, will be heard from every mouth, while "he that soweth, and he that reapeth, shall rejoice together!"

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

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

your report to hear and examine, and may "obtain like-precious faith with you."

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

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

power and grace of Jesus, that you can say with the Samaritans, "Now we believe, not because of thy saying; for we have heard him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world?"

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

During his stay in that town, an application was made to him by a nobleman from Capernaum, which was at a considerable distance, in behalf of his sick, and, as he supposed, his dying son. In general, not many rich and honourable persons of the world resorted to him: but sharp troubles will often constrain those who have been most averse from Christ to implore his presence and assistance. Here was one of high rank, an attendant probably, in the profane court of Herod, who, having heard of the fame of Jesus, hastened to him; and besought him, in compassion to his distress, to heal his child. This circumstance alone proved that he possessed a measure of faith, though mixed with much unbelief. Perhaps he had

previously declared that he would not be convinced except he saw some miracle performed. For our Lord spake to him in language of reproof, which implied such a disposition : " Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe."

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

And, after such abundant evidence, shall we fluctuate in our principles? Shall we any longer doubt the power or the grace of Jesus? Is any case too hard for him? Or will he reject any humble application for mercy? We learn, from this example, to recommend

our children to his care. If they are not afflicted with bodily sickness, their souls are universally diseased. Let us pray, therefore, "Lord, come, and heal my son." But let us not forget our own necessity; and therefore, while we ask for our offspring, let us implore a blessing for ourselves. Our faith may, at first, be weak, and our notions dark; but if we are encouraged to have recourse to Jesus, and earnestly solicit his gracious help, he will extend his compassion to us; and we shall shortly glorify him for his great salvation.

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

J E S U S C H R I S T.

SECT. VII.

Jesus preached at Nazareth—miraculously escaped—dwelt at Capernaum—wrought various miracles—rose early—took a circuit round Galilee—called four disciples, after a miraculous draught of fishes.

SUCH an inhabitant as Jesus the world never saw either before or since. Every view of him, during his abode on earth, not only furnishes instruction, but excites amazement. Each part of his life is a proof of his own assertion, and a striking comment on what he said, "My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me, and to finish his work."* While we observe his activity, may we feel the force of his example, as an incentive to diligence! And as we perceive with what strength of evidence his high character and divine mission were displayed, may our faith and hope in him abound more and more!

Wherever he travelled, he appeared as no common person: both the doctrines he delivered, and the miracles he wrought, proved incontestably that he was more than an ordinary Prophet, and no less than

* John. iv. 34.

the Saviour of the world, "over all, God blessed for ever."

"He returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee:"* being anointed to his office by the Holy Ghost, he was, by the same unction, directed, assisted, and comforted in its execution. "The power of the Spirit" so accompanied his ministrations, as to carry a forcible conviction to the minds of others. "There went a fame of him through all the region round about; and he taught in their synagogues, being glorified of all." We shall not wonder that he engaged the general attention of the neighbourhood, if we take a view of his conduct, and the circumstances which occurred, during his first circuit round Galilee.

"He came to Nazareth," which had been the place of his education, and principal residence till he entered on his public ministry. He had declined going thither for some time after his visit at Jerusalem, and turned aside to the other parts of Galilee, on account of the prejudices which his townsmen entertained. He himself testified that "a prophet hath no honour in his own country:" those who have known him in his childhood, or lived with him on terms of intimacy, in a lower situation, are seldom disposed to pay him reverence or attention, as a teacher of religion. We might have imagined, indeed, that Jesus would have been an exception to this general observation, and that those who were witnesses of his astonishing wisdom and holi-

* Luke iv, 14, &c.

ness, even at an early age, would have been prepared to listen and submit to his instructions. The fact, however, was otherwise, as our Lord had foretold; for he was sufficiently aware of the enmity of the Nazarenes against him. But, though he knew what his reception would be, he determined to bear his testimony amongst them, and give them an opportunity of manifesting their real dispositions. Nor are the ministers of his Gospel to be deterred from declaring the truth, though they have to combat with prejudice and aversion. Necessity is laid upon them, and they must deliver their message, whether men will hear, or whether they will forbear.

Upon his arrival at Nazareth, "he went, as his custom was, into the synagogue on the sabbath-day." At Jerusalem alone, where the temple stood, sacrifices were offered, and the Mosaic rites observed. But in almost every town and village synagogues were erected, like our parish-churches, for public worship, for prayer and praise, for reading and expounding the Scriptures. To them our Lord resorted, whenever he had opportunity; so that he may be proposed as a pattern of a diligent attendance on religious institutions. But do all his professed followers copy after him? Is it their custom, their habitual practice, to frequent the house of God? Is there any excuse to be urged for their neglect of it, which will bear examination? If Jesus thought it right to be a constant worshipper in Jewish assemblies, who shall despise or turn away from Christian ordinances? Who shall say that he has no need of prayer

and the word of God, since Jesus himself paid such regard to them?

One particular person presided over each of these places, called "the Ruler," who directed the service, and had a power of appointing any man, seriously disposed and properly qualified, to officiate in it. Accordingly, upon the appearance of Jesus in the synagogue at Nazareth, he was desired to read; and what was probably a lesson for the day furnished him with a suitable text for his first sermon among them. The attention of the congregation was fixed upon him, while they heard him repeat those remarkable words, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor: he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord."* The passage confessedly described the office of their expected Messiah; and, while they were anxious to know what application he would make of it, he solemnly declared that it was fulfilled in himself.

The completion of the prophecy affords strong consolation to us. We are here taught to regard Jesus as the Anointed of God, sent from above, and as bringing with him the gracious offers of pardon for the guilty, peace for the miserable, and salvation for those "who are ready to perish." In this representation the sinful, depraved, and helpless condition of man, is clearly

* Isa. lxi. 1—3.

implied ; and the blessings of redemption are freely proposed to the acceptance of all who feel and lament the melancholy truth. If we pride ourselves on any fancied goodness or ability of our own, we grossly mistake our case, and overlook the grand peculiarities of the Gospel ; nor can we receive those important benefits which Jesus came to bestow. He gives wisdom to the ignorant, righteousness to the guilty, sanctification to the unholy, and redemption to the miserable captive. But he confers no favour on the proud and self-sufficient, who, not being sensible of their own necessities, will not submit or apply to him.

We ask, then, Are you "the poor," of whom the Prophet speaks ; poor, in a spiritual sense, as perceiving yourselves destitute of every thing really excellent ? The Gospel proclaims glad tidings in your ear : Jesus brings a message of mercy to you, and bids you take "the unsearchable riches" of his grace.

Or, are you distressed in mind, not on account of worldly losses, but from a conviction of your guilt and danger ? Is your anguish extreme, so that, under the dread of God's displeasure, you cry out, "Thy rebuke hath broken my heart ?" Jesus is commissioned to administer suitable and adequate relief. He will "bind up your wounds, pouring in oil and wine," and will continue his kind attentions to you till the cure be perfected. It is his peculiar office "to heal the broken-hearted."

Do you fear that the sentence of condemnation is gone forth against you, and that you are detained as "prisoners" in the hands of divine justice ? Such, in-

dead, is your natural state ; nor is there any escape possible but by the gracious interposition of Jesus. He grants " deliverance to the captives," cancels the sentence, and proclaims a full forgiveness. Or, do you bewail your spiritual bondage, under the oppression of those enemies to whom you have long been subject, and who are too strong for you? On this account, also, we would direct you to look unto Jesus, who alone can rescue you from this miserable servitude. He calls upon you to assert your freedom ; for " he says to the prisoners, Go forth ; to them that are in darkness, Shew yourselves."*

You are distressed, perhaps, by your extreme ignorance in divine things, and lament that all appears darkness and confusion to your minds. It may be that you had conceived highly of your own discernment, but now are free to confess that you are spiritually " blind." It is a happy change. While you said " We see," you would have spurned at the proposal of any one to open your eyes. Now you cannot but welcome the Saviour, who " recovers the sight ;" and exhorts you to " anoint your eyes with eye-salve, that you may see."†

Yet, after various struggles and painful conflicts, your distress may probably increase, if no sensible deliverance be wrought for you ; and every attempt to gain your liberty may make your chains the more galling and insupportable. You are, therefore, fitly described as being " bruised" with your fetters. But,

* Isa. xlix. 9.

† Rev. iii. 18.

though you are heavily oppressed, and unable to extricate yourselves, your case is not desperate. Jesus appears with a powerful arm, which shall be exerted in your behalf. He not only gives you permission to go forth, but he himself will "break your bands in sunder," release you from the tyranny of the world, the flesh, and the devil, and "make you free indeed."*

Should the desponding fear arise, "We have sinned so long and so presumptuously, that mercy cannot now be extended to us; the time of grace is expired:" this great Prophet of our God will quiet your apprehension, while he "preaches the acceptable year of the Lord." In his name we can assure you, that, if you return to your offended God, you shall all find a favourable reception. He waits to pardon and to bless you. This is the happy season prefigured by the ancient jubilee: the proclamation of the Gospel, like the joyful sound of the trumpet among the Israelites, declares that your debt is cancelled, the appointed hour of your enlargement is come, and your inheritance shall be restored. "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."†

Such is the purport of that important prophecy which our Lord applied to himself, and on which he insisted in his preaching to the Nazarenes. And what was the effect produced? They were struck with wonder: the dignity and grace of the Speaker made a strong impression upon their minds. But admiration was all: they did not seriously consider his words, or

* John viii. 36.

† 2 Cor. vi. 2.

believe his declarations. Their prejudices immediately appeared ; and they began to cavil at the meanness of his birth and extraction. He knew what was in their hearts, and addressed them, probably with a particular reference to their very thoughts concerning him. He gave them to understand that he was aware of their objections to his family and education, and that he expected they would demand from him the same miraculous operations which he had wrought at Capernaum. But he warned them not to reject the evidence offered to themselves, while he maintained that God, as a sovereign Arbiter, is not accountable to any one ; and that he has a right to dispense his favours as he pleases. Accordingly, many perish, who are placed in the most advantageous circumstances ; and mercy is extended to others at a distance, whom we should not have thought of. Thus he observed to them that a poor Gentile widow was relieved by Elijah, while many widows in Israel were left to suffer all the severities of famine :—a stranger and an enemy to Israel was cured of his leprosy by Elisha, though the same dreadful disease continued to prey upon many others in the very country and under the immediate notice of the Prophet. He intimated, then, that the grace of the Gospel might be sent to some remote kingdom, even among the Heathens, and that they themselves might never experience the blessing, but be destroyed through their unbelief.

This was more than they could bear : “ they were filled with wrath ;” and the violence of their conduct soon discovered the enmity of their hearts. Without regard to the day, the place, or the service, they rose

up in the utmost confusion ; and, with murderous rage having thrust him out of their city, they were on the very point of casting him down from a high precipice. But his hour was not yet come : no schemes could prevail to take away his life till he was pleased to resign it : and therefore by a miracle he passed through the midst of them, and escaped unhurt.

Ah ! foolish people and unwise, who so rashly rejected the Saviour ! We might be constrained to weep over their sad case : but it will become us rather to be anxiously concerned for ourselves. What reception does Jesus meet with amongst us ? His Gospel excites the admiration of many, who know no more of it than the Nazarenes. They soon begin to cavil, and urge a variety of objections. It is in vain to answer : nay, perhaps, the most temperate reply may increase their violence : nor would it be surprising if the ministers of Christ, like their Lord and Master, should be driven away with contempt and abhorrence. Ah ! what availed it to live at Nazareth, to be near to Jesus, to observe his holy conduct, and to hear his gracious words ? Or what avails it now to be placed within the notice of the most excellent persons, and under the most lively ordinances of religion ? Even in such circumstances, you may feel a vehement hatred of the truth. But beware : whilst you endeavour to get rid of that which gives you pain, you are rejecting your best mercies, and destroying your immortal souls.

After his escape at Nazareth, our Lord took up his abode for some time at Capernaum, a city not far distant ; but the inhabitants, it should seem, were of a

different temper and disposition. Here he appears to have been particularly active in preaching on the sabbath-days; and from this place, probably his chief residence, he went through the whole neighbourhood, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the Gospel of the kingdom.

We admire the undaunted courage and unwearied assiduity of our Redeemer, in labouring to promote the salvation of men. Though his life had been attempted in one town, he desisted not from his work, but vigorously pursued it in another. The same line of conduct he prescribed to his Apostles: "When they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another."* Thus, also, should his ministers in every age be zealous, diligent, and persevering, in their exertions for the benefit of souls. Instead of being discouraged by opposition, they should renew their endeavours: and though prevented from doing it among certain persons whose welfare they anxiously desire, in different situations they may be more successful.

What reception, then, did our Lord meet with at Capernaum? There were the most favourable and promising appearances: "They were astonished at his doctrine; for his word was with power." It is probable that much and important good was effected; for we are told that upon this occasion was fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, "The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them, which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up."†

* Matt. x. 23. † Matt. iv. 16. Isa. ix. 1, 2.

Happy, happy people, who gladly received what others contemptuously rejected ; who knew the time of their visitation, and upon whom “ the Sun of righteousness ” shone with such abundant splendour ! Let us bless God that our land also, which was once “ the region and shadow of death,” hath seen a great light, and that now we enjoy the meridian lustre of a Gospel day. Let us not be satisfied, however, to live in a Christian country, but be solicitous to experience the saving efficacy of divine truth, which is preached and professed among us. For this purpose let us seriously attend to the doctrine of Christ. Though we have not his personal ministry, he still speaks to us by his faithful servants ; and we are not afraid to assert, that, in numerous instances, how weak and unworthy soever the instrument may be, “ his word is with power.” O for the sacred influence of the Spirit, to apply it with energy to our hearts !

If we accompany our Lord, we shall perceive him displaying his high character by the various miracles which he performed in that neighbourhood. He denied to the men of Nazareth, on account of their violent prejudices; those clear and strong evidences which he afforded to the inhabitants of Capernaum. This, indeed, is agreeable to his usual procedure. To humble and sincere inquirers he is pleased to give advantages and opportunities for attaining divine knowledge, which he justly and wisely withholds from others. Let us be faithful according to the light we have ; and he will establish us more and more in the belief and love of the truth.

While Jesus was teaching in the Synagogue at Capernaum, a poor unhappy creature, under the influence of an evil spirit, miserably tormented, cried out aloud in the assembly, "Let us alone; what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? Art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God." This was a striking confession, perhaps unwillingly made by the devil through an impression of terror, or else intended to bring the character of Christ into suspicion, as if he were really confederate with wicked demons, and so to lay a foundation for that objection, "He casteth out devils through the prince of the devils."*

To show that he wanted not a testimony of such a kind, he rejected it with abhorrence, commanding the evil spirit to be silent, and to come out of the man. Immediately, at his word, the wretched sufferer, after being violently convulsed, was perfectly restored. No wonder that a general amazement took place, when Jesus appeared so decidedly superior to the powers of darkness, and that the fame of so singular a character was spread abroad through all the country.

The case of those who were possessed has been the subject of much inquiry, and no little controversy. Many would explain away the influence of Satan, and even deny his very being, and therefore they represent this possession as nothing more than a common disease. But the descriptions given in the New Testament seem utterly inconsistent with such an interpretation :

* Matt. ix. 34.

as the evil spirits were spoken to, and returned answers, distinct from the persons themselves, and several circumstances attending them can never be accounted for by any natural disorder whatever. Surely there will be no inconsistency in allowing, according to the literal sense of the Scriptures, that the devils were then permitted to exercise an extraordinary power over the human body in many instances. Though we read or hear not of such cases in other periods of history, they might be suffered at that time, in order that the character of Christ, as our great Deliverer, and his complete victory and triumph over the prince of darkness, might be more clearly exhibited.

We perceive the malice of Satan, who is disposed to make use of every method to harass and torment us; and we are thankful that his rage is restrained. But, though he practise not such acts of violence as formerly upon the animal frame, does he therefore exert no influence which is to be dreaded? Alas! he has yet so strong an ascendancy over the minds of men, that many "are taken captive by him at his will."* With a destructive efficacy, "he now worketh in the children of disobedience."† But we behold with love and admiration the divine Redeemer entering the lists against him, and obtaining a complete conquest. He can "bind the strong man," and let the oppressed go free. "For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil:‡" and during the abode of Jesus upon earth, full

* 2 Tim. ii. 26.

† Eph. ii. 2.

‡ 1 John iii. 8.

scope was given for determining the conflict. We may, therefore, safely commit ourselves to the care of our exalted Leader, who delivers his people "from the power of darkness," and promises "The prince of this world shall be cast out."* But let us not be satisfied with confessing "Thou art the Holy One of God." This did the unclean spirit; and this may we also do, while confederate with Satan. Our system of faith, possibly, may be orthodox, and our hearts, at the same time, filled with impure desires, and enslaved to vile affections. The Gospel needs no such advocates; nor will Jesus accept our praises, or own us for his friends, whatever testimony we may bear for him in such a state.

Common diseases, likewise, were instantly removed by a touch or a word. The mother of Peter's wife being dangerously sick, the case was represented to him; nor was the application vain. With tender compassion he relieved the distress of the family, commanding the fever to depart, which threatened her life; and the cure was so perfect, that she was immediately able to wait upon the company. We regard him still as the great restorer of health; and this agency should be acknowledged in the efficacy of what are called natural means. Physicians and medicines should not be despised or neglected; but our dependence must be placed upon and our supplication directed to Him, in every time of trouble.

* John xii. 31

No case was too hard, nor was any humble petition for his help ever rejected. "When the sun was setting, all they that had any sick with divers diseases brought them unto him: and he laid his hands on every one of them, and healed them." This was done on the close of the same day in which he had been preaching at Capernaum, when the sabbath, according to their computation, was ended: for they professed such a high regard for that sacred season, that they thought it unlawful to carry, or even to heal, their sick, till the evening. Then also, in various other instances, he triumphed over the malice and power of Satan. He cast out many devils, who all proclaimed him to be the Messiah: but he rejected their testimony, as before, that he might not seem to be acting in concert with them.

After the sabbath had been thus spent, probably with much bodily fatigue, he rose very early the next morning, "a great while before day."* Retirement, contemplation, and prayer, were the refreshment and the solace which he sought. Blessed Jesus! how does thy example reprove our sloth and sensual indulgence! We allow the necessity of secret devotion; but how many excuses do we urge for our neglect! Our time is supposed to be so much wanted for other engagements, that we can find little or no leisure for this. But our Lord has taught us to deny ourselves the gratification of sleep, and rise early, that we may secure an opportunity of waiting upon God, and thus draw

* Mark i. 35.

down from him renewed supplies of grace from day to day. Those, who are engaged in public life, have especial need of this caution : for a constant hurry of employment, even in religious concerns, may distract and enervate the mind, unless its strength be repaired by frequent retirement.

But, though privacy should be ever so delightful to us, we must be content to have it interrupted. When the works of God calls us away, we must go with cheerfulness and vigour. "The people sought him, and came unto him, and stayed him, that he should not depart from them." It might have been agreeable to himself to have fixed his abode amongst persons so much attached to him. But he resisted their solicitations ; and, with eager desire to promote the end of his ministry, he said, "I must preach the kingdom of God to other cities also : for therefore am I sent." Accompanied, then, by certain disciples, he took a circuit throughout Galilee, publishing the glad tidings of salvation, and confirming his doctrine by miraculous operations. In the course of that journey astonishing cures were performed, and such a general admiration excited, that immense multitudes from various and distant places resorted to him.* This was a pleasing sight ; but we know, that, with respect to many, they saw, and heard, and wondered, without any real benefit to themselves. It is so now. Great numbers are drawn together by the faithful preaching of the Gospel ; and there are those who seem deeply affected by the

* Matt. iv. 23—25.

things which are spoken ; yet, notwithstanding their professed approbation and zeal, we have no reason to conclude that they feel the saving efficacy of the truth.

It has been observed that our Lord was attended by certain disciples, and an account is given us, at the commencement of this journey, of the manner in which four of them, viz. Peter and Andrew, James and John, were called to this attendance.* The two former, at least, had been attached to his service before, though not such constant followers as to forsake their common employments. But now, as he travelled much, their presence and assistance upon all occasions became more necessary ; and it was designed, that, by accompanying him throughout his ministry, they themselves should be gradually prepared for the work. They were all of one occupation, and that of mean estimation in the world ; for they were fishermen. Jesus sought not his Apostles out of the palaces of kings, or the schools of philosophers : but, while he chose the poor and the unlearned, it more evidently appeared that “ the excellency of the power” in their preaching “ was of God, and not of men.”

When he addressed himself to them, he found them diligently engaged in their business ; and we also are taught to expect his favourable notice, though our time and attention be much taken up with the lowest offices of life. The people in Galilee with great eagerness pressed after him to hear his instructions, not merely in the synagogues, but wherever he went. On one oc-

* Mark i. 16—20. Luke v. 1—11.

casión, therefore, we perceive him delivering his doctrines by the sea-shore, and out of Peter's vessel.

When this was done, that he might encourage Peter and his three companions the more cheerfully to follow him, by affording them a sort of typical representation of the wonderful effects which should be produced by their ministry, he desired them to launch into the deep, and let down their nets. Peter replied, that they had laboured all night in vain, but that, animated by his direction, they would make another attempt. He, that gave the word, commanded success, and proved that he was Lord of the whole creation ; through his influence, an immense multitude of fishes were brought to the net and taken up, so as to fill them all with amazement. The presence of the God of nature was acknowledged ; and Peter in particular, overwhelmed with confusion and terror, under a sense of his unworthiness and unfitness to stand before such an exalted Personage, cried out, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." The Saviour, however, instantly dispersed his fears, and then explained the miracle, as exhibiting an event of far greater consequence, the success of his preaching, since from that time he should "catch men."

Now they could not hesitate to devote themselves wholly to his service : for what had they to dread ? With readiness, therefore, they forsook their worldly occupations and connexions, no longer anxious about their nets, their ships, or their friends ; and, at his invitation, became his constant followers. Nor did their Lord disappoint the hopes which he gave them. When

three thousand souls were converted by their ministry on the day of Pentecost, they appeared indeed to "catch men," and a far more stupendous miracle was wrought than this draught of fishes.

Shall not we, also, confess and adore the divine power of Jesus? But let us not say, "Depart from me, O Lord;" but rather, "Come, Lord, to my help, for I am a sinful man: Come and subdue, as well as pardon, mine iniquity, that I perish not, as I deserve!" But are we willing to follow Christ? And do we resolve to forsake all, though not exactly as the Apostles did, yet fully and deliberately to give up and to suffer whatever he may require? If not, we cannot be his disciples. O, may that same energy, which so disposed their minds, be exerted upon us! Especially, may the ministers of Christ, in our day, obey his call! May they be furnished for their office by an abundant measure of faith, love, and zeal; and so taught to cast the net of the Gospel, that they also may catch men, and bring them to the knowledge and the service of their divine Master! Amen.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. VIII.

The first part of our Lord's sermon on the mount containing the eight beatitudes.

IF we consider what manner of person Jesus was, how uncommon the works he performed, and the instructions he delivered, we shall not be surprised that immense multitudes flocked to him from every quarter. We shall rather wonder that they were not more deeply affected by what they saw and heard, and that so few in comparison became sincere converts and disciples. During his abode in Galilee, when he perceived himself surrounded by a numerous assembly, with generous compassion for their souls he seized the opportunity to preach a sermon of peculiar extent and importance, in which he declared, more publicly and expressly than he had done before, the purposes of his coming, and explained more clearly the spiritual nature of his kingdom.* “He went up into a mountain,” probably that his voice might reach to a greater distance; and, according to the custom of the Jewish

* Matt. v. 1, &c.

teachers, he was seated whilst he gave his instruction. His disciples were his near attendants, and to them in a more immediate manner he directed some parts of his discourse, whilst many things concerned the multitudes at large. With peculiar solemnity "he opened his mouth, and taught them" with such wisdom and majesty as astonished them all.

This sermon of our Lord upon the mount is a rich and invaluable treasure, containing instructions of the highest moment. We do not say that it is an explicit and entire declaration of the Gospel method of salvation; for the season was not then come for the wondrous plan to be so fully disclosed as it afterwards was. During the continuance of Jesus upon earth, before he had finished the mystery of redemption by the sacrifice of himself, he thought it not proper to insist, very minutely or very publicly, on the nature and reasons of his death, or on the spiritual benefits to be received through faith in his blood. On these subjects, indeed, he was not wholly silent, but he left them to be further opened to the Apostles themselves by the teaching of the Holy Spirit, that they might communicate them to the world after the grand event had taken place. We are, therefore, to look for a more perfect summary and clearer account of evangelical doctrines in the apostolical writings than in the history of our Lord's life. Some have asserted that nothing more need be preached to the people than what the sermon on the mount contains; yet perhaps these very persons would not be willing that every part of this discourse should be closely pressed upon their consciences. Let us pay all

possible deference and respect to every word of Jesus, and endeavour to enter into the full meaning and importance of this solemn address: but let us not presume to say, what some have absurdly and impiously maintained, that this alone is sufficient, as if every other portion of the Scriptures might be safely expunged or disregarded.

It seems to have been the design of Jesus, on the occasion before us, to prepare his hearers for a more cordial reception of the Gospel, and to lead them gradually to the knowledge of himself. With that view he endeavoured to correct the false notions they had imbibed concerning his kingdom, and to impress upon their minds a deeper sense of spiritual and eternal things. He spoke, therefore, in such a manner as to display the dignity of his own character, and to show the new necessity of their submission to him. He pronounced benedictions, as being invested with supreme authority; he interpreted the divine law, not as a common expounder, but as the sovereign Lawgiver, with "I SAY UNTO YOU," and represented the grand decisions of the universal judgment as depending upon himself, everlasting life or everlasting misery being awarded to the sons of men according to his irreversible sentence.

May we listen with reverence and profound attention to this glorious Prophet; and, while we meditate on his word, may we learn his will, and bow with unfeigned subjection to his command!

In the first part of his sermon, he appears, like the great High-Priest, blessing his people. He speaks,

not as from Mount Sinai with thunderings and lightnings, but with invitations and promises of mercy. He had been already preaching "The kingdom of heaven is at hand;" and of this his followers entertained very gross conceptions, expecting that he would erect a temporal dominion, with outward pomp and splendour, and exalt them to places of power and dignity. But now he strikes at the root of their errors, showing them that his kingdom is of a spiritual nature: and, after giving a description, contrary to their preconceived ideas, of the tempers and blessedness of its true members, he represents it as indispensably necessary that they should be distinguished by a peculiar holiness.

Here are eight different parts of the Christian character delineated; to each of which a promise is annexed, and on each a blessing pronounced. These are not to be separated, as if the Christian might possess no more than one of them: for they are united in the man of God, and the combination of the whole constitutes his excellency. There is also a beautiful connexion between them, and one may be considered as leading to another.

1. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Though the Lord pays no regard to us for our outward condition, since "he accepteth no man's person," yet those, who are "rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom," are generally found among "the poor of this world;"* and it must be allowed that their situation exposes them to

* James ii. 5.

the fewest temptations. But “the haughtiness of men” of every rank, whether poor or rich, “shall be bowed down :”* for those only can receive the salvation of the Gospel, who are sensible of their spiritual indigence. They feel and confess that they are destitute of every thing truly valuable before God ; and, having no possessions to boast of, they are willing to come as needy supplicants, that they may be relieved out of the inexhaustible fulness of Jesus. A knowledge of themselves has taught them that they have neither wisdom, righteousness, nor strength ; and, under such a conviction, they may conclude against themselves as unfit objects for the notice of a holy God. But Jesus speaks to their case, and declares, not only that they may hope for, but that they have already obtained, mercy. They “are blessed.” The world may pity and despise them ; but thus saith the Lord, who dwelleth in the heavens, “To these men will I look :”† nay, he hath begun to manifest his favour to them. “Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Of such only does the church of Christ below consist, and from such is the church above replenished. None others do sincerely submit to Jesus, and partake of his grace ; and these alone shall reign with him for ever : he hath reserved for them “a crown of glory,” and a “kingdom that cannot be moved.”

2. “Blessed are they that mourn.” Unfeigned and deep distress cannot but follow from real poverty of spirit. Those, therefore, who know themselves, will be “mourners in Zion.” How many causes of sorrow

* Isa. ii. 11,

† Ixvi. 2.

do they discover ! Their tears flow down for the sake of others, when they behold the sin and misery which are in the world. But, being in the first place concerned for themselves, they weep before God with sincere contrition, not so much for the present inconveniences or future dangers to which their iniquities may expose them, as for the heinousness of their conduct against that great and gracious Being, who has the strongest claims to their gratitude, love, and service. They may be derided for their dejection of mind, as if they were lost to all happiness : but it is otherwise ; “ They that sow in tears shall reap in joy.”* It is a peculiar mercy to be brought into this very state ; for now it appears that the Lord hath a tender regard to them. He “ hath begun a good work in them,” the effect of which, though painful for the present, will be “ quietness and assurance for ever.”† The lips of truth declare “ they shall be comforted.” Perhaps they fear “ they shall lie down in sorrow ;” but, under the influence of the Holy Ghost “ the Comforter,” they shall receive strong consolation. Through a discovery of the power and grace of Jesus, they shall be “ filled with all joy and peace in believing :” and soon shall every tear be wiped from their eyes, when they shall be admitted to a complete and uninterrupted happiness in heaven.

3. “ Blessed are the meek.” Wherever there is a proper apprehension of the nature of sin, a total renovation takes place in the affections of the mind ;

* Psal. cxxvii. 5.

† Isa. xxxii. 17.

“ the lofty looks of man are humbled,” and the fierceness of his temper is restrained. Such is the origin of true spiritual meekness, which will produce an humble deportment towards God and man. Those who are partakers of this grace will bow down with submission to the sovereign will of God, without murmuring or cavilling at his appointments or commands; and, sensible of their own ignorance, will implore and obey his guidance. With respect to their fellow-creatures, they will not be forward or assuming, but “ take the lowest room;” not peevish or self-willed, but kind and gentle; not easily provoked, or implacable under injuries, but they will return good for evil, blessing for cursing. The world in general are so opposite, that these persons may probably, be scorned as men of mean and little minds, destitute of all proper firmness and dignity. But the grace of God is upon them; and he, who hath implanted this disposition in them, will testify his approbation. They are happy; and none others have any true satisfaction; for all those affections contrary to meekness, such as pride, anger, cruelty, and revenge, imbitter the spirit, and invariably produce misery. But “ the meek shall inherit the earth, and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace.”* They taste the sweetness of life, and have the most exalted pleasures which earth can afford; for inward tranquillity gives the highest relish to every enjoyment in this world: and these only shall “ inherit the land” of bliss

* Psal. xxxvii. 11.

and glory, of which the Land of Canaan was a type, "and dwell therein for ever."*

4. "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness." With what eagerness do men in general pursue present objects! But they who are under a divine influence have fixed their supreme and most ardent affections upon things spiritual and eternal: and these they covet with a vehemence which resembles our natural longings for meat and drink, when we suffer the extremities of hunger and thirst. In preference to every other object, they desire to possess "the righteousness of God;" that righteousness which will answer the demands of his law, and that also by which alone they can serve him with acceptance upon earth, and be fitted for the complete and everlasting fruition of him in heaven. From a conviction of their guilt and depravity, they perceive their inability to justify themselves; and then, with the utmost importunity, inquire, "How shall man be just with God?" They feel likewise a want of conformity, in their hearts and lives, to the will of God; yet cannot be satisfied without it. While they contend with the corrupt affections of the soul, they pant after its total renovation, and pray most fervently to be "holy in all manner of conversation."

Happy indeed is the man in whom desires like these are excited! They are not the wishes of sensualists or worldlings, but of them only whom God hath blessed: and he will give them more grace. They shall not

* Psal. xxxvii. 29.

be disappointed, but abundantly gratified by a ready communication of those benefits which they so ardently covet: "they shall be filled." The Lord "satisfieth the longing soul, and filleth the hungry soul with goodness."* They shall be completely justified through the righteousness of their Redeemer, and shall stand with confidence before God: being sanctified by the Spirit, they shall persevere in righteousness and true holiness. They are, therefore, encouraged to indulge the most delightful expectations: "Let the heart of them rejoice that seek the Lord."†

5. "Blessed are the merciful." Such as have been now described will not confine their attention to themselves; but, having "tasted that the Lord is gracious," will feel compassion for their fellow-creatures, and show mercy according to their abilities and opportunities. There will be various occasions for the exercise of this temper, owing to the ignorance, sin, and misery, which have overspread the world. They will, therefore, consult the happiness and welfare of all around them; and, under the strong influence of Christian benevolence, will endeavour to please and profit them. Accordingly, they will give "the soft answer," which "turneth away wrath;" and "in their tongues will be the law of kindness," because the law of love governs their hearts. This will also be evinced by their actions as well as professions. They will cheerfully relieve the necessitous, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the sick. Nor will their

* Psal. cvii. 9.

† cv. 3.

compassionate regard be confined to the body; but, with generous concern for the souls of men, they will desire to warn the careless and instruct the ignorant, if so be they may bring them into the way of righteousness and peace.

These alone possess real tenderness and liberality of mind; and it must be generally allowed that such persons are the most happy in themselves, an ornament to religion, and a blessing to society where they live. But they are of a heavenly extraction, born from above. The merciful temper here described is so contrary to the natural selfishness and cruelty of the human heart, as to form a strong evidence of divine grace. These, then, are they who are truly "blessed:" and "they shall obtain mercy." This is the character of all whom God hath reconciled to himself; by such marks they are to be known and distinguished; and it is an unwarrantable presumption to imagine ourselves in the favour of Heaven, without this influence of the Spirit, disposing us to show favour to our fellow-creatures upon earth.

6. "Blessed are the pure in heart." The Lord is a God of purity, who "desires truth in the inward parts," and is not to be imposed on by any external display or pretences of piety. But, ah! "how abominable and filthy is man!"* He has "yielded his members servants to uncleanness," his "mind and conscience is defiled," his "heart desperately wicked."† We must, therefore, not merely be reformed as to

* Job xv. 16. † Rom. vi. 19. Tit. i. 15. Jer. xvii. 9.

gross immoralities, but “renewed in the spirit of our mind.”* The subjects of Christ’s kingdom are “born again,” their principles are changed, their tempers sanctified, They renounce all iniquity, not in appearance or profession only, but with a cordial desire and determination never more to return to it. They cheerfully “yield themselves unto God,” and he is pleased to make their hearts his own habitation through the Spirit. These, then, are “the blessed of the Lord:” for, however they must deny themselves many sensual gratifications, the Lord God hath bestowed upon them nobler enjoyments. They are separated from the world; but he hath consecrated and united them to himself: and it ought to suffice that “they shall see God.” Even here he will manifest his grace and glory, and “lift up the light of his countenance upon them.” And can any earthly delights be compared with their happiness, when they are favoured with his visits, and the discoveries of his love? Yet this is only an earnest of their future felicity. Soon shall the veil, which now in a great measure hides from them the brightness of his face, be entirely removed; and, when admitted to that beatific vision, they shall be transformed into his righteous image. “We shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is:”—“and so shall we ever be with the Lord.”†

7. “Blessed are the peace-makers.” In such a world as this, various contentions may be expected, which will prove and evidence our characters and dis-

* Eph. iv. 23.

† 1 John iii. 2. 1 Thess. iv. 17.

positions. Amidst warm and angry debates, the men of grace will be distinguished by their labouring for peace. They "study to be quiet," and to promote harmony in their families and neighbourhood, willing rather to sacrifice their own interest than bitterly to strive for it. Having much forgiven them, they refuse not to forgive a brother, though offending "seventy times seven;" but eagerly embrace him, and renew their assurances of kindness. It grieves them to observe discord among others; and, as far as their influence will extend, they endeavour to repair the breach, and effect a reconciliation. This is indeed a happy temper, and we need not fear to pronounce the possessors of it "blessed," not only as enjoying a sweet tranquillity of mind, but as having in themselves an evidence of the divine favour. For, by their resemblance of him, who is the God of peace and love, they prove their relation to him, and shall be taken notice of under the honourable distinction of his children. They are "born of God," who has put his Spirit upon them; and, as children, they are heirs; heirs of the kingdom, where all will be united in bonds of strictest union for ever and ever.

One would think that a character so excellent must meet with universal esteem and respect among men. No: it is quite otherwise. As "the friendship of the world is enmity with God,"* all, who bear his image, must look for contempt and hatred from those who are in a state of opposition to him. But we add, according to our Lord's declaration,

* James iv. 4.

8. "Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness sake." The saints of God are a constant reproof to the wicked, who, from that very circumstance, are often extremely mortified, and frequently enraged. Hence it generally happens that the more eminently holy, zealous, and useful, any persons are, the more malignity and violence they meet with. But, while they suffer for their attachment to the Saviour, in the cause of truth and righteousness, let them take up their cross with faith and patience, and not lament their case as severe and calamitous. He, who has separated them to himself from the midst of an evil world, as his own peculiar people, will support and comfort them; and, whatever temporal losses they may sustain in his service, he will bestow an abundant recompense. They may, possibly, be excluded from earthly possessions, but they shall inherit the kingdom of everlasting glory.

The character last mentioned so exactly described our Lord's disciples, who stood by him, and whom it was necessary to encourage in the prospect of their approaching sufferings, that he made a particular application of it to them. While he pronounced his benediction, he taught them to expect scorn, opposition, and infamy, for their adherence to him, even though they were ever so circumspect in their conduct. But he called upon them to maintain a holy confidence and joy, and to exult in the lively hope of the glorious reward, remembering that all the patriarchs and prophets of old had trodden the same path, and endured the same cross.

Let the disciples of Jesus in every age be reminded that they also should look for similar treatment from the world, and that it will become them to be equally bold and vigorous in the service of their Lord and Master; since to them likewise "are given exceeding great and precious promises." And let all who profess a regard to the Saviour attend to the succeeding admonitions of his sermon, in which he has enjoined upon them the most exemplary and distinguished holiness. For our divine Teacher added, "Ye are the salt of the earth," designed to prevent a general corruption, and to diffuse the sacred influence of truth and righteousness. In this view, how widely may your usefulness extend! But, if you forget your character, and so far lose your spirituality and zeal as to become like salt which is deprived of all its virtue, you will incur a peculiar measure of contempt and abhorrence. You are exalted to an eminent situation, which calls for constant circumspection and unremitting diligence: as elevated objects attract a nice invidious attention, so your whole temper and deportment will be narrowly observed. Nor should you think it enough barely to escape censure; you are raised up, and furnished with talents for the benefit of others, whose best interest, therefore, you should study to promote. Conceal not your gifts, but labour to improve them for general good. Like the grand luminary of heaven, you are intended, in your sphere of action, to give light to them who are in darkness. Be careful, then, so to live, that all men may see what they ought to be, and, perceiving the nature and excellence of true religion through-

out your spirit and conduct, may be led to admire and praise the grace of God in you, and persuaded to tread in your steps to the glory of your God and Father."

To this purpose, and so practical in their tendency, were the exhortations of Jesus. Now, if it be allowed that the essence of Christianity is the same which it was originally, those only are to be accounted real Christians in our day, who answer to the descriptions here given. We ask, then, if you desire to partake of the blessings, do you sincerely comply with the injunctions, of the Gospel? Let us advert to those we have now considered. Are you "poor in spirit;" emptied of your self-sufficiency, and willing to be indebted to the grace of Jesus for your whole salvation? Are you sensible of your guilt, and do you "mourn" for sin with a godly sorrow? You may, possibly, shed many tears; but are they tears of genuine repentance? Do you understand what it is to be "meek and lowly in heart?" Is the haughtiness of your carnal mind subdued, so that you can "esteem others better than yourselves?" On what are your affections chiefly fixed? Is this the object, that you may attain "the righteousness of God;" and, being accepted of him, that you may serve him in true holiness? But do you feel any ardour of desire after it, and labour for it as for your necessary food? Have you any "bowels and mercies?" And, with an abhorrence of your natural selfishness, do you "open your hand wide," as opportunities are given you, for the relief and comfort of the distressed? Again, are your consciences purged? Do you dread the thought of resting in "a form of godliness;" and do you pos-

sess real purity, the inward sanctification of the Spirit? "As much as lieth in you," do you "live peaceably with all men;" avoiding quarrels, and endeavouring to reconcile contending parties? And of what sort is your reputation in the world? Is your religion offensive to any? Or are you willing to incur reproach for Christ's sake, anxious rather to promote the honour of God by your exemplary conduct, than to secure public favour to yourselves?

If you are destitute of these evidences of grace, we dare not pronounce you "blessed." No: we must faithfully warn you, that you deceive not your own selves. Amongst men you may, possibly, be accounted happy; but the God of heaven declares you accursed. Be solicitous, therefore, to be rescued out of your present wretched situation; and cry, with importunity, "O Lord, remember us with the favour that thou bearest unto thy people: O visit us with thy salvation; that we may see the good of thy chosen, that we may rejoice in the gladness of thy nation, that we may glory with thine inheritance!"* Amen.

* Psal. cvi. 4, 5.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. IX.

The second part of our Lord's sermon on the mount, in which he expounded certain precepts of the moral law.

THE multitudes who flocked around the Saviour were, probably, very eager to know what new doctrine he would preach; or averse to receive him, from an apprehension that he undervalued, and meant to subvert, the goodly system which the Old Testament established, and of which they boasted. To give them, therefore, the necessary information concerning himself, and to remove their prejudices, he solemnly asserted that he came not to destroy the law or the prophets, but to fulfil.*

Since the Lord God changed not, one revelation cannot be repugnant to another. Yet there may be in one age a more full and express declaration of the divine will than in the preceding; and the former communications might be intended to prepare the way for a clearer manifestation of the same truths. Thus, in fact, the increase of sacred light has resembled the gradual approach of day. The great plan of redemp-

* Matt. v. 17, &c.

tion was intimated to Adam upon his fall, and in succeeding generations fresh and brighter discoveries of it were afforded to the church, under the Mosaic dispensation, and by various prophets, till the appearing of Jesus Christ, to whom, as to one common object, they all referred. He came not, therefore, to overturn the fabric already built, but to establish and complete it; not to contradict any foregoing revelation, but to unfold the grand scheme, and perfect the whole. Agreeably to this account of the matter,

1. He answered the types of the ceremonial law. They were only the shadow, but he was the substance. In themselves they would have been weak, trifling, and absurd; but, as prefiguring the Saviour, and deriving an efficacy from him, they were important, and worthy of all respect, during their intended continuance. They had their full accomplishment in Jesus; and, therefore, he set them aside, not as if they had been of no use, but because he was in himself every thing which they were designed to represent.

2. He explained and enforced the moral law. This is the everlasting rule of righteousness, the grand obligations of which depend not on any peculiar circumstances of situation, but exist the same in all ages and places; for God must ever require his rational creatures to love him with all their hearts, and one another as themselves. This law Jesus "magnified and made honourable;" for by his own obedience and expiatory sufferings he showed the extent and equity of its demands, by his spiritual exposition he vindicated it from

false interpretations, and by his holy precepts he enjoined its observance upon all his people. From this view of the subject it appears, that believers, though released from its penal sanctions, are still indispensably bound to regulate their tempers and conduct agreeably to its directions.

3. He hath also completed the design of all former dispensations, and supplied their defects. The days of the Son of man, therefore, are called "the last days," because no succeeding revelation is to be expected. Patriarchs and prophets looked forwards to his incarnation, and paved the way for him : and now, since he has come, and accomplished every thing predicted, nothing more is wanted, either to discover the will of God, or to make reconciliation for us. What thanks, and love, and service, do we owe for our distinguished privileges under the Gospel ! And what returns are due to Him, who hath perfected for ever the great work of our salvation !

Our Lord proceeded in his sermon to maintain the authority and full extent of the law, declaring that God will not recede from his righteous demands, and consequently that either obedience must be paid, or punishment inflicted. Wilfully, therefore, to transgress the least of those precepts, and encourage others to do the same, as if they might be dispensed with, would render us unfit for a place in his kingdom ; and, to be distinguished in that society, we must yield an universal submission to them, though they may seem ever so trifling, and enforce the same conduct upon others.

While Jesus inculcated the necessity of holiness, it is probably that the people fixed their attention on the Scribes and Pharisees, whom they held in high veneration for their professions of sanctity. It would, therefore, astonish them to hear this new Teacher requiring his disciples to go much further than those whom they considered as the most eminent patterns of religion, and asserting that otherwise they could have no place in heaven. But it was proper to expose these vain pretenders, to detect their errors and hypocrisy, and to warn their deluded followers no longer to be led by them, who were of all men most opposite to the temper of Christianity. They boasted much of their attachment to the divine law, while, in reality, they could not bear the strict and spiritual sense in which it ought to be understood, and, by their subtle interpretations, explained away much of its meaning. Jesus however, has instructed us, contrary to their glosses, that it enjoins perfect holiness, in the dispositions of the mind, as well as the practice of the life. Their righteousness was merely external ; for all their works were done “ to be seen of men ;” but we are taught to seek for inward purity, and not to be satisfied with regularity of manners, or a show of piety. They were influenced, even in their religious duties, by base principles, “ for a pretence making long prayers,” and boasting of their own works, as if the happiness of heaven were no more than a just recompense of their deserts. But we are warned of the sin and danger of trusting to ourselves, whatever our attainments may be, and of the

necessity of a better obedience than our own, to procure our justification before God.

From a general declaration, our Lord descended to a particular exposition of the spiritual nature of the law, in certain precepts, which had been shamefully perverted; guarding the people against their erroneous teachers, and requiring their attention and submission to himself.

1. He insisted on the extensive meaning of the sixth commandment. This was understood as if it had forbidden nothing more than the actual and open commission of wilful murder. But Jesus, the great Lawgiver, instructs us that it condemns whatever may lead to such violence, and, therefore, that all causeless anger or desire of revenge, and all opprobrious language arising from this vehemence of passion, will justly expose us to the divine vengeance. Accordingly, it were vain to worship God, or expect any advantage from his ordinances, so long as the heart remains under the influence of malignant dispositions. We must lay aside our animosities, and consent to make restitution for injuries committed, when we would "compass God's altar;" for the most costly sacrifices and professions of the warmest devotion will not compensate the want of brotherly love. Common prudence, also, as well as religion, requires that contentions be dropped, and a reconciliation effected, as soon as may be. If you are threatened with a suit by one whom you have offended, how much better is it by a speedy accommodation to repair the breach, than obstinately to persist in the contest till matters are brought to an extremity,

and rigorous justice must have its course ! If it be thus in human affairs, how much more is it your interest and duty, without a moment's delay, to seek peace with the Lord God Almighty, whom you have provoked ; lest, being summoned to his bar, you be cast in the trial, and sentenced to the infernal prison, from which there can be no release !

Such was the substance of our Lord's address : and shall we not allow the suitableness of it to ourselves ? Or shall we boast, like the Pharisees, that, because we have not shed the blood of a fellow-creature, the sixth commandment has no charge against us ? Are we free from all violence of temper ? Or have our tongues never betrayed the vindictive desires of our hearts ? Are we now at peace ! Or have we, at least, anxiously sought for it ? And when we lift up our hands in prayer, is it " without wrath ?" We may thank God that so many powerful restraints are laid upon the sinful affections of men, or else every part of the world would present us with scenes of horrible confusion. But, though our fury may be repressed, so as not to break forth to the disturbance of society, God may behold much iniquity within us ; for it is possible, that, where a calmness and benevolence of spirit are pretended, much rancour may remain in the heart ; and, in God's account, " whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer."*

2. He opened the spiritual and extensive nature of the seventh commandment. Here also, as in the preceding instance, the prohibition had been confined to

* 1 John iii. 15.

merely external acts ; and he only was deemed an adulterer who had been guilty of the grossest uncleanness. But Jesus teaches us that inward impurity brings us under the divine condemnation ; that a lustful desire and a wanton eye are forbidden, in the full sense of the law, no less than the absolute violation of the marriage-bed. And will any person say, I have never felt any such irregular motions in my heart : my eye hath never wandered in a lascivious manner ? Let us remember that we are always open to the inspection of that God, who “ searcheth the heart, and trieth the reins,” and that he hath noted down all our secret imaginations, looks, and wishes. Let us not promise to justify ourselves before him.

If we would avoid the sin of lewdness, we are to resist every secret propensity to it, and subdue the corrupt affections of the flesh. This must be done at any pains or expense, as Jesus has instructed us ; the inordinate desire is to be abandoned, though it may seem as dear to us as a right eye, or profitable as a right hand ; though it may be as severe a trial to part with it as to cut off the most tender and useful member of the body. For, as, in chirurgery, a gangrene must be stopped, or else death ensues ; so here the most favourite passion must be given up : there is no room for hesitation ; it must be done, or else everlasting destruction in the torments of hell will be the consequence.

Our Lord was naturally led from the exposition of the seventh commandment to condemn the prevailing practice of divorcing their wives, as fancy, disgust, or resentment, might dictate. Separations, indeed, had

been allowed by the Mosaic law, under certain restrictions ; but the permission had been abused to the worst purposes ; and we are now taught that nothing but unfaithfulness in the wife can absolve the husband from the obligation of the marriage bond. Alas ! it is too evident, from the state of things among ourselves, that, with respect to this important subject, the authority of Christ is but little regarded, and that the chastity and continuance which he inculcated are most shamefully violated.

3. He expounded also the third commandment. The heinousness of perjury, which is a solemn appeal to God in attestation of a lie, was generally acknowledged among the Jews. But they showed a manifest contempt of the majesty of God by the frequency of their oaths in common conversation ; and it should seem that they so interpreted the law as to justify the practice of swearing, if they abstained only from the express mention of God, or did not call upon him to confirm a falsehood. How ingenious is the depraved nature of man in perverting the truth, and inventing arguments for the vindication of his own evil conduct ! For, agreeably to our Lord's representation, we may ask, What do you, when you swear by any creature ? Your appeal in effect is, and must ultimately be, to the great Creator himself, though it contain not any direct invocation of his name. It is therefore enjoined that you "swear not at all."

We are not forbidden to make use of oaths in a solemn manner, and for important purposes, in support of the truth ; for these were commanded in the Old

Testament, and unexceptionable examples are recorded in the New. But Jesus prescribes a rule only for our common conversation. Inasmuch as it is an insult to Jehovah to introduce him as a witness or an arbiter of our trifling controversies in familiar discourse, we are required to avoid all strong and vehement asseverations, and only simply to affirm and deny, without having recourse to any other expedient to establish our credit. For not merely the gross expressions of profaneness, but all those customary forms of speaking, by which men endeavour to strengthen and support their declarations, arise from evil habits and wrong tempers, or perhaps from Satan himself, who in various ways solicits us to sin.

Let us not, then, be satisfied barely to abstain from the palpable violations of the commandment by perjury or impious execrations, but regulate our conversation with "simplicity and godly sincerity." How little is this attended to! Is not the name of God frequently introduced, in a light and trifling manner, as an embellishment of discourse, or an expression of surprise? Do we not adopt certain fashionable phrases, which have the nature of oaths, or lead to them? Alas! the practice is general; and thus God is provoked among us every day. For, to pass by the multitude of perjured persons and blasphemers, we observe that the sacred appellations and titles of God and his Christ are treated with the utmost levity or contempt, being constantly used as words of course, or the mere expletives of language, by many who boast of their morality, and possess the fairest reputation in the world.

4. He guarded against a misunderstanding of the Mosaic law of retaliation. A precept had been given for the direction of magistrates in the punishment of injuries; for they were authorized to take "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." This had been interpreted as if private persons might avenge themselves for an assault, and requite the offenders in kind. But Jesus teaches us that it belongs not to individuals to vindicate their own wrongs, and that appeals to the law should not be made for losses of small consequence. He forbids us to "resist evil," and enjoins a meek and patient submission to the violence and injustice of others. This he has inculcated in certain proverbial expressions, which admit not of a literal interpretation. It is not difficult, however, to collect from them that a malicious vindictive mind is totally opposite to true religion; that, rather than furiously withstand or retaliate one injury, we ought to expose ourselves to a second; that it were better quietly to sustain any trifling damage, such as a blow on the face or the loss of a garment, than rigorously insist upon a compensation; and that our benevolence should be so extensive, that no suitable opportunity of doing good should be neglected.

It is easier to find the meaning, as to the substance at least, than to make the application. Who among us are willing to be directed by this divine Teacher? The temper of real Christians and that of worldly men are quite contrary to each other; and to fulfil the law of Christ would subject us to the reproach of cowardice

and meanness of spirit. Be it so : let us cheerfully bear the imputation. That sense of honour, which is so much contended for, is a principle most odious to God, as it implies a vindictive disposition, or, what must lead to it, a determination not to pass by the most trifling offence. We need not, then, reflect upon the Scribes and Pharisees, as retaliation is practised and justified among ourselves. Whoever insults the man of honour must answer it at the peril of his life. Nay, do we not all, under provocations, feel a desire of revenge? And have we not been betrayed into such a conduct as our Lord has here condemned? He, however, has given us an example of forbearance as well as the precept. May we study to attain "the mind which was in Christ Jesus!"

5. He inculcated the law of universal love. It was allowed to be a divine command, that we should love our neighbours : but, as if neighbours included only those who are nearly related or intimately connected, the command was so expounded, that it was judged right, perhaps expedient, to treat those with contempt and rancour who were of a different country or religion. How unwarrantable and impious an interpretation! Jesus therefore restored and vindicated the sense of God's ancient law. He has taught us, that no one, however malevolently disposed, is a proper object of our abhorrence, and no injurious usage a sufficient reason for withholding the kindest offices of Christian benevolence. He has instructed us, that, as the children of God possess peculiar privileges, they

must surpass all others in a spirit of forgiveness and disinterested goodness, and to prove their relation to their heavenly Father by their resemblance of him.

What shall we say to these things? Have we so learned Christ as to love our enemies? It were easy to profess this enlarged philanthropy, while we enjoy the general countenance and favour of the world. But can we stand "the fiery trial," and, under the most injurious persecutions, return good for evil? Are we not easily offended, and hardly reconciled; "implacable, unmerciful?" And is this the temper of mind which becomes the heirs of heaven? "What do we more than others?" Or wherein do we differ from them who know not God? What similitude do we bear to him whom we call our Father? "God is love;" and, if we feel not the power of that principle, we are not renewed after his likeness, nor can we dwell with him.

But shall we not own that the divine law, in the extensive sense which is here given, is most excellent? Can we object to it as an unnecessary strictness; or suppose that a holy God can require less? Is not every injunction perfectly reasonable, and well calculated to promote universal happiness? or, would it be better, if we were allowed to harbour in our hearts the least degree of anger, lust, or revenge?

Yet such a view must abase our pride; for who shall dare to boast "We have done our duty?" Have we not satisfied ourselves with a partial and merely external obedience, without attempting to regulate the inward desires of the mind? "The commandment is exceeding

broad.”* And each particular precept, in the spiritual meaning, proves that we are all in a state of guilt and condemnation. Let the conviction have its full influence, and we shall then welcome the Saviour, who “is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.”†

Believers, however, as before observed, though “justified from all things,” are by no means released from their obligations to holiness. Does Jesus speak as if the law were designed to be abrogated, or to be no longer binding upon his people? Is it not, on the contrary, strongly enforced for the direction of our conduct? Here, then we should study “what manner of persons we ought to be,” how far superior to others “in all holy conversation and godliness.” Our impartial and constant regard to duty will be the safest evidence of our faith; and without it our expectations of the divine favour are no better than the hope of the hypocrite, which shall perish.

* Psal. cxix. 96.

† Rom. x. 4.

J E S U S C H R I S T.

SECT. X.

The third part of our Lord's sermon on the mount, in which he cautioned his disciples against vain glory and the love of the world.

THE necessity of religion is generally acknowledged, whilst the nature of it is but little understood. Many comply with the forms and put on the semblance of piety, and fancy themselves devout because they are so accounted, at the very time that they are under the influence of the basest dispositions. Such was the Pharisees of old, who, with all their boasted goodness, betrayed a hatred of the doctrine and genius of Christianity. It became expedient, therefore, for our Lord to expose their real character, to guard his hearers against their erroneous notions, and show how essentially different his disciples must be. This he did throughout his sermon on the mount.

In that part of his discourse to which we now proceed he gave the most solemn cautions to his followers to beware especially of the two dangerous principles, vain glory and the love of the world, by which the

Pharisees were actuated ;* for, notwithstanding their high pretences to devotion, and the admiration in which they were held, their religion proceeded from pride, and consisted with an inordinate attachment to present things. Our righteousness must be of another sort, or else we cannot be the subjects of Christ's kingdom, however frequent or assiduous we may be in the external observances of divine worship. Let us pray that He, who alone knows our secret desires and purposes, would discover to us and eradicate every motive and affection of our hearts incompatible with true Christianity, that we may not be found destitute of that "holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord."

I. We are cautioned against vain glory, or that ostentatious display of our own goodness, which is meant to catch the notice, and procure the admiration, of men. An arrogant spirit, which is always contemptible, is never more preposterous than when it assumes the mask of piety. It were the height of absurdity and profaneness to practise those very duties which should proceed from the deepest humility, and cannot be acceptable without it, merely to gratify a conceited and ambitious temper : and yet it is a common case. The most painful and mortifying injunctions are submitted to, in order to gain a character. Persons professing godliness have peculiar need to guard against this principle ; for they are not so much in danger from sensual as from spiritual wickedness. They are often overtaken and deceived, even in their best services, by the

* Matt. vi. 1, &c.

secret workings of pride, which, while it conceals itself from the nicest observation, influences and corrupts the whole conduct. Our Lord, therefore, mentions several instances of religious acts, which we may be tempted to perform entirely or chiefly with a view to the esteem of our fellow-creatures; and on this account he calls upon us to "take heed."

1. Almsgiving.—The duty is not in this place commanded; but it is supposed that every disciple of Jesus will practise it: and it is universally allowed among Christians that we are under indispensable obligations to relieve the distressed, according to our abilities. But our attention is here directed to the proper principle of obedience. Alms are to be given from a supreme regard to God, not to men. Hypocrites, we find, can distribute large sums, for the purposes of charity. But usually they are ostentatious; and, as they seek the praise of the world, they fail not to publish their own liberality, and contrive that it may be of such a sort, or exerted at such times and places, as will engage general notice and esteem. The motive being wrong throughout, the most extensive munificence, on this plan, cannot be an acceptable service. Surrounding spectators and witnesses, who look only on the outward appearance, may express their admiration; but the Lord God, who is forgotten and despised, since the sacrifice is not offered to Him, will bestow no recompense. Yet even these persons "have their reward." Many are ready to compliment them for their generosity, and court their fa-

vour; but this, which is all they will receive, is a poor benefit indeed, fleeting as a breath of air!

How different is the disciple of Jesus! His aim is to approve himself to God; and, to be consistent, he should be as glad to embrace a private as a public opportunity of doing good. Secret liberality is, also, particularly pleasing to God, since it springs from a pure regard to Him, and solicits no human applause; and He, who beholds our inward purpose, will make an open acknowledgment of it, before the whole universe, in the great day,

But do we not stand reprov'd either for avarice or pride? Are we "ready to distribute, willing to communicate?" Are we seeking out those objects of charity who are concealed from the view of the world? Or are we not rather forward to proclaim our own bounty; or, at least, most disposed to lend our assistance where we shall probably obtain notice and admiration? But, if we have such respect to the opinions of men, we are acting from the vain-glorious principle which is here condemned.

2. Prayer.—This also will be allowed to be an important duty, and one which enters into the life and essence of religion; those who habitually neglect it, so far from being eminent Christians, are no Christians at all. Yet the bare external performance of this service does not necessarily imply any real piety. Forms and ceremonies may be punctually observed, and warmly contended for, without a sincere regard to God. Hypocrites may be exact in their attendance upon divine worship, and value themselves because

they "make many prayers." They "draw nigh unto God with their mouth, and honour him with their lips, but their heart is far from him;" and therefore "in vain do they worship him."* They would gladly be thought religious; and accordingly they comply with such institutions and rites of devotion as are most likely to call them forth into public view, and procure them applause. Thus they may obtain the character of saints; and this is their grand object. But it is all that they shall have. From such persons "incense is an abomination unto God," and their boasted services will increase their condemnation. This was the very case of the Pharisees, whom our Lord described. They were so scrupulously observant of their stated times of prayer, they would not omit or delay the duty on account of any company or engagement. Nay, it should seem they contrived to be in places of much resort at those very seasons, that the eyes of the multitude might be fixed upon them, and this their sanctity be remarked and celebrated.

In opposition to this practice, Jesus enjoins the religion of the closet; not forbidding public, but commanding private, worship; or rather showing in what manner the latter should be performed. It were absurd and impious to seek the notice of men, when our concern is with God alone. If possible, we should retire from noise and observation, that we may avoid interruption, and maintain a holy converse with the God of heaven, abstracted from the cares and business

* Matt. xv. 8, 9.

of the world. This communion between God and the soul must, from the nature of it, be concealed from our fellow-creatures, and may not gain us respect in this life. But the eye of the Lord God is upon his people, at those times especially when they withdraw from human society to hold fellowship with him; and He will proclaim and prove to the assembled universe, for his own glory as well as their recompense, with what frequency and fervour they kept up their intercourse with Him.

Does not our Lord's injunction detect the hypocrisy of many? There are those among ourselves, who, like the ancient Pharisees, with a confident and clamorous profession of religion, express a decided preference for those services which bring them into notice, and take pains to catch the esteem and applause of the public. They may not stand to repeat their prayers in the open streets, as those of old; but do they not evince something of the same disposition when they are forward to call the attention of others to the ardour of their devotions? May we not fear, that, among the multitudes who constantly tread the courts of the Lord, many totally neglect the duties of the closet? In such a case, no sacrifice is offered to God; but all their works are done to be "seen of men."

From the foregoing caution, Jesus proceeded to give further instructions for the framing and presenting of our solemn addresses to God. He has directed us to speak with serious deliberation, and to avoid that foolish prolixity of expressions which the Heathens practised. All repetitions in imploring the divine blessing

are not condemned; for our Lord himself, three times together, in pouring out his soul before God, "said the same words;"* and it seems the natural effect of a pious fervour and importunity, to urge the same request again and again. But we are required to abstain from those repetitions only which are unmeaning, and not to suppose that a multiplicity of words will constitute a good prayer, or procure us a favourable acceptance. It is neither necessary nor expedient to protract our devotions to a tedious length, as if we could thereby give any information to God, or produce any change in his mind. We cannot, indeed, be too earnest, nor ought we to be weary of the service. But we should remember that we come to a God who knows all our wants and desires better than we can represent them, and who is more ready to bestow than we to ask his blessing.

We behold also an instance of the amazing condescension of Jesus, in delivering to his disciples a form of prayer adapted to their use. He takes them, as it were, by the hand, leads them to the throne of grace, instructs them what requests they should make, and even puts words into their mouths. The form here prescribed might be designed as a general model, by which we may frame our petitions: but it seems also intended to be introduced among our other devotions, and offered to God exactly as it is. Perhaps it was drawn up with a particular reference to the situation of his followers at that time; but with the utmost pro-

* Matt. xxvi. 44.

priety it is still continued as a suitable address for Christians in all possible circumstances, since it is a clear and compendious representation of their common desires and necessities, and every expression in it such as they may adopt for their own.

We cannot here give it that full consideration which its importance demands ; and therefore a few general observations must suffice.

The introduction or invocation teaches us to approach to God with confidence and love, as to a Father concerned for our welfare, and yet to maintain the deepest reverence and humility before Him, who is in heaven, and who there reigns in glorious majesty. When our minds are thus impressed with suitable conceptions of the God whom we worship, we may proceed to the petitions, which are six in number, the three first relating to the honour of God, the three latter to the necessities of man. We pray, therefore, that the name of God may be hallowed, that the excellency and perfections of his nature may be known throughout the world, and that every where He may be regarded with all that veneration which is justly due unto him. For this purpose we desire that his kingdom of grace may be universally established ; and that the Gospel, which is designed and calculated to promote it, may be spread abroad with increasing energy and success. But, since this dispensation of mercy requires unfeigned obedience to God, we beg, that, as all in heaven do, so all on earth may, bow with entire subjection to him ; and that as the angels incessantly, completely, and cheerfully execute his will, so we, in

this lower creation, may be enabled by his Spirit to do the same.

We are dependent, guilty, depraved, and helpless ; and our petitions should be framed with a reference to this our state and character. We therefore represent the wants of our bodies, and beseech Him, who is the God of providence, and " filleth all things living with plenteousness," to supply us with whatever may be needful for our temporal support. We ask for bread, as an article of absolute necessity, not of luxury ; yet that only from one day to another, and not for years to come. As we have forfeited all claims to the divine favour by sin, it is always proper to confess our demerit, and deprecate the wrath we have deserved : we are debtors to God, and liable to justice ; therefore we pray that he would cancel the black account, and no more urge his demands upon us. Here we lay hold on his promises in the new covenant, and have recourse to him, as he is revealed through the Mediator, a God " forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin." But, since it is probable, in the present state of human affairs, that we may sustain much injurious treatment from others, we solemnly declare before God our readiness to extend full forgiveness to them, and only implore his mercy as we ourselves pardon our offending brethren. Being exposed to continual assaults, which may endanger our souls unless God preserve us, we request that " He, who keepeth Israel," would so guide and dispose of us in his providence, that we may not be brought into circumstances of severe trial, or the formidable conflict of temptation. In order to this, we supplicate

the divine aid, that we may be delivered from the attacks of the wicked one, who is our grand adversary, and from every thing which is to be dreaded as a real evil in this life or another.

In the conclusion of the prayer, which is a doxology, or an ascription of praise to God, we acknowledge this to be the worship which he deserves, and has a right of demand. He is the universal Sovereign, the almighty Potentate, the God of all perfection, the unchangeable Jehovah, from everlasting to everlasting. And, while we thus adore and magnify the Lord for his greatness and his excellency, each of these considerations will furnish a plea by which we may enforce our requests. We confirm the whole, and again express our ardent wishes for a favourable acceptance, when we add, in the close, "AMEN," or, So let it be.

In the form which Jesus here taught his disciples, the declaration annexed to the petition for pardon of sin is of so much consequence, and, as it might appear to them, so new and singular, that he subjoined a particular reason for it, observing, that God will receive no sacrifice except from the man who is of a placable and forgiving temper. And is this the temper with which we lift up our hands to the throne of grace? Do we possess those principles and affections which the words imply or call for? How often have we repeated the prayer without any holy spiritual desires, when we have neither felt nor understood the force of the language! And is this the worship which we dare to offer to the heart-searching God? As he is not to be imposed on,

or satisfied, like our fellow-creatures, with an unmeaning compliment, we may justly fear, lest our pretended devotions should provoke his indignation against us.

The same caution which Jesus gave respecting the two forementioned duties is extended also to another instance :—

3. **Fasting.**—However the folly, pride, and superstition of some persons may have brought the practice into disrepute and contempt, it is clearly incumbent on those who profess the Christian name. The disciples of Jesus cannot, with any propriety, decline that service, for the right performance of which their Master has left them particular directions. We confess it has been abused ; but let it not therefore be totally laid aside. Some, possibly, “ in will-worship, and” a pretended “ humility,” have “ neglected the body :” * yet still it should be our care to “ keep under our body, and bring it into subjection,” † on better principles.

Here, then, as in the other cases, we must beware of vain glory, which is ever ready to infuse its corrupt influence into our best actions. How preposterous is it to make a parade with that which is intended to denote humiliation ! We must, therefore, avoid all ostentatious display, which is so common with hypocrites ; and, while with sincerity of heart and unfeigned contrition we practise self-denial and mortification, we shall not pass unobserved, nor fast in vain. Men may disregard or despise us ; but God will graciously ac-

* Col. ii. 23.

† 1 Cor. ix. 27.

cept us in the Son of his love, and publicly reward what is really done unto him, though we shall not presume upon any merit in ourselves, as if we had a claim to his favour on the ground of justice. But to what purpose do we speak of abstinence? For where are those who "crucify the flesh with its affections and lusts?" Who among us are willing to renounce any beloved gratification? Do not most persons plead for, and pursue with an insatiable avidity, every sensual pleasure and delight?

In these several instances, almsgiving, prayer, and fasting, the religion of Jesus instructs us to fix our supreme regard upon God, as the Judge to whom alone we are accountable, and to be perfectly unconcerned about human opinions and decisions. It commands us to look forward to a future day, when all hypocrisy will be exposed and detested, and the excellency of the true believer confessed and admired. How many mistakes will then be rectified! "For that, which is highly esteemed amongst men," will appear to be "abomination in the sight of God."* On the contrary, Jehovah will declare his approbation of those who faithfully discharged the duties of righteousness in secret, though their names were cast out as evil: and, to the astonishment of those who disposed and hated them, he will proclaim, with high commendations, how much they have done for him, and appoint them a glorious retribution for the most private exertions of their charity, piety, and abstinence.

* Luke xvi. 15.

II. We are required to beware of the love of the present world. There is no sin against which the Saviour has delivered more or stronger cautions than an inordinate attachment to the concerns of this life, and perhaps there is none more dangerous to the soul. It frequently lies concealed under the garb of a religious profession; for men are apt to flatter themselves, and cry "Peace, peace," if they practise no gross iniquity, approve of right doctrines, and give a regular attendance to the means of grace. Yet all this may be, while the heart remains totally alienated from God, and "goeth after covetousness." He, who is solicitous only to promote his secular interest, and consequently immersed in worldly cares, cannot possess any proper regard to God, or his own everlasting welfare. Though decent in his conduct, orthodox in his notions, constant and exact in all external forms and observances, he is just as far from heaven as the drunkard and adulterer; perhaps more so, as being less likely to apprehend his own danger.

There might be a peculiar suitability in our Lord's address to his disciples on this subject, not only as warning them of the selfish and avaricious disposition of the Pharisees, but as giving them the expectation of suffering the loss of all things for his sake. However, it is as necessary for us at this time, as it was for them, to possess that spiritual abstraction of mind which is here inculcated. We must turn our attention from the vain things of the present life to the more important concerns of that which is to come.

We are forbidden to seek our happiness in the world, and the reasons are plain and forcible. Whatever we may gain on earth will be short and uncertain, but the possessions of heaven are durable, and far removed from every contingency. Let us beware, then, what choice we make, and what object we propose to ourselves; for our affections and pursuits will be determined by the nature of that treasure which we desire to attain. But in order to decide aright on that which is most valuable, a clear discernment is absolutely needful. How shall the body be directed in its movements, if the eye be so vitiated, that it cannot properly distinguish one thing from another? Or how shall the mind lead us to a just conclusion, whilst it is under the influence of wrong maxims and inclinations? There is a mental darkness which perverts the judgment, and produces the most fatal consequences.

Is it supposed that some happy expedient may be found, by which religion may be made consistent with a devotedness to present gain? No, it is impossible: the love of God and the love of the world cannot prevail in the same heart. They are like two adverse masters, whose commands and expectations contradict and oppose each other; so that we cannot be sincerely attached to their different interests. We should, therefore, determine without delay whom we will serve, and instantly renounce one of them.

Do any plead, "I am not enslaved to the world; I look not for real happiness in it, nor seek great things to myself, but am anxious only to secure a comfortable

subsistence?" It may be proper to remark, that our Lord's injunctions require us to lay aside all distressing cares about the enjoyments, or even the common supports, of life. His directions on this head equally concern the poor and the rich. For, as in each situation the heart may be drawn away from God to present objects, both are forbidden to indulge any excessive solicitude about their secular affairs.

We may apply the reasons which Jesus has alleged. God has given you life, and he is able to maintain it. You may surely rely upon him for the continuance of that vital principle, which he has graciously bestowed upon you; since he can as easily preserve as create. Behold the tender care which he exerciseth over inferior animals! He constantly provides sustenance for the fowls, which are of far less value than you. But, with all your anxiety, how little can you effect for yourselves? You cannot lengthen out your existence one moment. Or, should you be distressed about procuring a suitable covering for your body, we refer you to the flowers of the field. The Lord God has clothed them with a gayer attire than the most splendid monarchs can exhibit: and shall you be unwilling to intrust yourselves with him?

Besides, this worldly solicitude, which may be expected to prevail in them who know not God, is unsuitable and dishonourable to your character, who profess to be his children. If God be your Father, he cannot be inattentive to your wants. Is there not, also, a more glorious object proposed to you, which demands your warmest affections and most diligent

pursuit? You cannot be too earnest in preparing for your eternal state : and if that be your first and grand concern, as it ought, every earthly care will appear comparatively small. But to secure an admission into heaven is the best expedient for promoting your temporal interest, since God has engaged by his covenant to bestow all needful support in this life upon the heirs of his kingdom. You ought, indeed, to be assiduous in your application to business ; for to expect your sustenance from God, whilst you neglect the appointed means of obtaining it, would be extreme presumption. But, with all your most strenuous exertions, it will become you to live in cheerful dependence on the providence of God from day to day, and not to look forward, with anxious dread, to any future events. Each returning period of time brings its difficulties : and therefore, instead of anticipating the trials of the morrow, you should diligently improve the present season, in which you may find enough both to do and to suffer.

Such is the temper of mind which Jesus has inculcated in his sermon on the mount : and so superior to the world must all his disciples be. Yet this is an excellency which can be attained only by the knowledge of him. For “this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith.”*

But how few appear to possess that divine principle ! We perceive and lament the prevalence of a pharisaical spirit among ourselves. Are not most persons hurried away by an immoderate attachment to their

* 1 John v. 4.

gain? And do not some, even of those who profess godliness, betray a sordid, unbelieving, distracted state of mind? We need not advert to the multitude of open and profligate offenders; perhaps more are destroyed through the fatal influence of covetousness, which may consist with a fair character among men, than by any other sin whatever. Let us beware, and examine where is our peculiar danger. Let us watch and pray, lest our hearts be engrossed by those secular cares, which may, to a certain degree, be expedient and necessary; and, remembering how very poor is the richest treasure which can be attained in this life, let us "covet earnestly the best gifts," and desire above all things to possess "the unsearchable riches of Christ." Amen.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. XI.

The conclusion of our Lord's sermon on the mount, in which he gave various practical directions and exhortations.

WE have already perceived much of the excellence and importance of the sermon which Jesus delivered on the mount; and the conclusion, to which we now proceed, will appear equally interesting. We shall meet with further proofs of the holiness of that religion which he taught, while we consider the various directions here given for the conduct of his disciples.*

To guard them against the censorious disposition of the Pharisees, who were ever prone to condemn others in the most rigorous manner, he commanded them to abstain from all rash and severe judgment. "Judge not" is, indeed, an extensive precept. We cannot help forming an opinion of those actions and characters which force themselves upon our observation; nor are we forbidden, surely, to blame what is evidently wrong; nay, our duty requires, as we love our brother, to point out his faults, and warn him of his danger. But we are enjoined not to conclude against any person precipitately, nor to be influenced in our deci-

* Matt. vii. 1, &c.

sions by pride or malevolence. Yet do we not perceive amongst ourselves much of this very spirit, which prevailed with the Pharisees of old? How few are actuated by that divine principle of love, which "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things!"* Do not the various parties, who contend so warmly for their respective sentiments and adherents, both in politics and religion, discover a bitter and malignant disposition? How unwilling are they to believe any thing favourable of each other, or to make any candid allowance for the mistakes or failings of their opponents! How keen in their remarks; how glad to find any thing justly censurable; and how eager to fix names of contempt and reproach, one upon the other! We need not inquire or assign a reason for this besides our own depravity. We need not impute bigotry and malevolence to this or that party, for they are the weeds which spring up in every soil, and are the natural produce of the human heart. "The spirit that dwelleth in us lusteth to envy."†

Jesus has suggested some important considerations, which should deter us from forming any rash judgment. Those who are most severe in their reflections upon others need expect no favour from their fellow-creatures. Men will not be disposed to pardon or palliate their misconduct, but will greedily catch at an opportunity of requiting them with the same acrimonious censures which they have liberally dealt out. And what treatment may they look for at the hands of a righteous God? How will they stand before him,

* 1 Cor. xiii. 7. † James iv. 5.

when their characters are scrutinized with that rigorous exactness with which they have decided upon others? He has determined that "they shall have judgment without mercy, who have showed no mercy."*

It should also be considered that we are but ill qualified to pass sentence on any persons around us. Few of their actions, in comparison, fall under our notice, and, perhaps, of those few we see not the whole. We may not understand their inward principles; or we may conclude too hastily from appearances, which are deceitful, or from mere reports, which are generally vague and uncertain. If, however, there be something in their manners which we must condemn, may not certain extenuations be admitted in their behalf? We know not under what temptations and difficulties they have laboured, and how much they have been excluded from opportunities of information or admonition. At least, a sense of our own ignorance and liableness to err, through prejudice and misconception, should incline us to draw the most candid and charitable conclusions: and the remembrance of our own numerous and aggravated faults should deter us from speaking evil of any man.

Jesus has instructed us, likewise, to look well to our spirit and conduct, when we undertake to reprove. Our office in life, and our Christian duty in a private situation, may frequently render this painful task necessary. But, while we narrowly inspect others, we should pay a strict attention to ourselves. It would be absurd and preposterous to spy out every minute

* James ii. 13.

failing in a brother, and at the same time to be wilfully blind to our own enormous offences. Yet this is generally the case with censorious persons, who are, of consequence, incapable of passing fair judgment, and giving a proper admonition. Correction and reformation should begin at home; for those, who allow themselves in bad habits, are like men whose eyes are so obscured that they cannot discern objects aright. And as the sight must be cleared, in order to form any just decision concerning things around us; so must the mind be freed from the love and power of sin, that it may be qualified to determine honestly, and bring a true charge against another. "Cast out the beam out of thine own eye, and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye."

Prudence will require us also to consider the character of those whom we may wish to rebuke or exhort: for there are some such profane and bold contemners of every thing good and serious, that any solemn admonition would not only be lost upon them, but excite in them the most violent resentment; which, besides bringing us into difficulties, might cause the name and the truth of God to be blasphemed. Therefore the Saviour adds, "Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine:" and on the same ground Solomon directs us, "Speak not in the ears of a fool; for he will despise the wisdom of thy words."*

The caution, probably, may be abused, and urged

* Prov. xxiii. 9.

in defence of that cowardly disposition, which is afraid of opposing sin upon any occasion whatever. While, therefore, we plead for prudence and reserve, let us endeavour to regulate our conduct, not by worldly motives, but by a supreme desire to promote the glory of God. It may be difficult, in particular cases, to determine the line of propriety and duty, or still more difficult to pursue it; on which account we shall have need of constant application to the God of all grace for his guidance and assistance. Jesus, therefore, proceeds to inculcate fervour and importunity in prayer. We seek not for an exact connexion in the different parts of this discourse; yet exhortations to call upon God appear at once suitably to follow from the preceding subject.

It has been objected, however, "Though our work be arduous, our petitions to God can avail us nothing. He knows our wants, and, if he chooses, will supply them; if not, our arguments or entreaties can never persuade him." An impious suggestion indeed! Will you not be thankful, if God will dispense mercy to you in any way? He requires you to surround the throne of grace with incessant cries; and, if you decline that service as hard or unreasonable, you will perish for ever for your proud contempt of his offered blessing. He understands that you every day feel fresh occasion for food to eat; and, if he pleased, he could give you bread from heaven. But he has appointed the husbandmen to labour, "that he may bring forth food out of the earth:" and, though the husbandman's utmost efforts would, of themselves, be ineffectual, yet, if

for that reason he should neglect the cultivation of his ground, he might justly starve in the time of harvest.

In making known our requests unto God, we should not be satisfied with cold and faint wishes ; for all the vigour which the soul is capable of exerting is required in this business. We are, therefore, commanded to “ask, seek, and knock ;” to “ask,” as those who feel the most pressing necessities, and cannot take a denial ; to “seek,” with unremitting diligence, as those who are pursuing an object of the first importance ; to “knock,” with repeated solicitations for admission, till the door of mercy be opened. Nor need we fear the charge of presumption for this importunity, though our sins have merited the severest displeasure of our God. It is his own injunction, and we must obey. But have we a good prospect of succeeding ? No less than an absolute certainty ; for an express promise is added, that our requests shall be granted, that the desired effect shall crown our endeavours, and a free entrance into the church and kingdom of God be allowed us. But, you will say, do not many fail ? No ; not one, who has sincerely complied with the rules prescribed. In no instance whatever has the divine declaration been falsified. We should form larger and more honourable conceptions of the goodness of God ; for Jesus has here taught us to consider him as a tender and loving Father, who cannot sport with the miseries of his dear offspring, or mock them when they cry for help. A striking appeal is made to the feelings of every parent, to determine the case. Such a monster is scarcely to be met with as can insult over his chil-

dren in distress, and, instead of ministering to their necessary support, give them that which would be an injury rather than a benefit. And shall the God of heaven be less kind and compassionate than we, who are depraved and perverse from our very birth?

But what effect should the mercy of God produce in us? It should render us not only fervent in prayer to him, but upright and faithful in our dealings, attentive and benevolent, one to another; nor is it possible that we can feel any real devotion towards God, unless we have learned to exercise justice and tenderness to our fellow-creatures. Hence Jesus has inferred the necessity of observing what is usually called the golden rule of equity, that we should treat all men as we could with reason expect them to treat us in similar circumstances. This contains a perfect system of ethics; at least, from this one simple direction, every moral duty may be deduced. It exhibits the substance of all that the law and the prophets have enjoined, concerning our relative obligations. The propriety and excellency of the precept must be generally allowed, since it calls upon every man to judge between his neighbour and himself. If he doubt what line of conduct he should pursue towards another, let him suppose, for a moment, a mutual change of situation, and then ask what usage he could fairly look for from him. He cannot help drawing a right conclusion. Yet how little attention is paid to this rule! Most persons seem to act upon contracted and selfish principles, as if they were the only people whose advantage and comfort ought to be consulted; and few indeed, comparatively, demean them-

selves in life with a real and disinterested integrity. We lament the disingenuousness we meet with in the world ; but let us seriously examine ourselves, and perhaps it will be found that we practise the most awful self-delusion, and sooth our consciences with a false peace.

Religion, however, is a solemn business, which cannot be managed, to any good effect, with a duplicity or indifference of mind. So our Lord proceeds to admonish us. If we would save our souls, we must be in earnest : and since many obstacles may await us, our utmost exertions will be required. At the very onset, much is to be done and suffered ; we must “ enter in at the strait gate.”

Two different ways are proposed to our consideration ; and we ought to deliberate very seriously which road we should take. The first which offers seems to possess some advantages. “ The gate is wide :” it is readily found ; and admission may be obtained without difficulty. There are no disagreeable restraints to deter us, especially as “ the way is broad ;” for every man may pursue his own course, and there is room enough to wander in an endless variety of paths. We need only follow the desires of our hearts, and we shall not deviate from it. Another very powerful inducement to proceed is, that a numerous company are travelling in this tract ; and, however various our tastes, we may meet with acquaintance suited to our wishes. “ Many there be, which go in thereat ;” so that, to be fashionable, we must join their society.

What hinders, then, but that here we fix our choice, since so many reasons invite us? It may be proper to ask another question, Whither does this path tend? and the answer, surely, will fill us with dismay, "It leadeth to destruction." A few fine flowers may be strewed in the way, to tempt unwary pilgrims: but how terrible will the end be! "Blackness of darkness for ever!" Many affect to disbelieve it; but the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it, and he will execute his own denunciations. Ah! foolish people, and unwise! Sport no longer on the brink of final perdition; but instantly stop, or rather endeavour to make good your retreat without delay.

Another road is proposed, which is attended with some discouraging circumstances; but let us consider of what sort they are, and what influence they should have. "Strait is the gate:" it requires mature thought to discover it, and many strenuous efforts to gain admission. In order to enter, we must consent to certain painful separations, we must part with many things which we might wish to retain, and expect violent opposition from our nearest relatives and associates. If there are such obstacles at the very beginning, what will be the remainder of the journey? Throughout the whole, even to the very close, it is what our corrupt nature will dislike. "The way is narrow;" so that we shall be constantly in danger of deviating from it. The restraints, also, which are imposed, the various snares laid for the travellers, and the resistance made to their progress, may discourage and distress them; for most persons are unwilling to combat with difficulties.

It may be asked, Who are they that walk this road ? And here, perhaps, another objection will be raised, since "few there be that find it." It is not pleasant to be marked out and derided as precise and singular ; and on this very account many will turn aside from a path which is so little frequented, and determine to be like their neighbours. Besides, the company upon this road is not only small, but of such a sort as to disgust those who are devoted to worldly pursuits. For "not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called ;"* so that they who dare to "tread the narrow way" must be willing to be accounted of a weak understanding, and of a mean contemptible spirit.

But will you not inquire, What will the issue be ? And will it not at once fix your resolution, to hear that "it leadeth unto life ?" Only enter by the appointed gate, and persevere in the path prescribed, and you will be eternally happy with your God. It will infallibly conduct you to heaven : every one that endureth unto the end shall be put in complete and everlasting possession of that kingdom of bliss and glory. Storms and tempests may for the present beat upon you, briers and thorns may obstruct your progress : but hold on your way, and soon shall your pilgrimage be finished, when you shall partake of that fulness of joy, and those pleasures, which are at God's right hand for evermore. Does there a doubt remain ? O, credit the declarations of him who cannot lie ; and delay not, for a moment, a business of unspeakable importance ! Whatever pain-

* 1 Cor. i. 26.

ful struggles it may cost, as you value the salvation of your souls, strive to gain admission at the only door, to which the Gospel refers you, before it be forever closed.

The difficulties of the Christian may be increased by the unsoundness of some who make a religious profession, on which account our Lord has warned us to beware of deceivers and hypocrites. False teachers, then, may be expected to arise in the church; nor should we be staggered when we find them. They may assume a specious appearance and pretend to much meekness and simplicity of manners, as if they belonged to the true fold; for they "come in sheep's clothing." But their designs are base and mischievous: they are enemies to the flock of God, which it is their aim to scatter and destroy, for "inwardly they are ravening wolves." "Beware," says the great Shepherd: be cautious what credit you give to the claims and declarations of those who put on the fair show of piety, and undertake to instruct others.

Is there, then, any sure test by which their sincerity may be tried? The general tenour of their conduct will furnish the most decisive proof. "Ye shall know them by their fruits." The nature of a tree is always determined by its produce. That only which yields something useful in life is allowed to be really good: and that which brings forth nothing but what is noxious or worthless will not long be suffered to stand, however beautiful in appearance; "it is nigh unto cursing, and its end is to be burned."* The subject

* Heb. vi 8.

is applicable to those who receive as well as those who give instruction ; and it is therefore incumbent upon all to inquire of themselves, Are there any fruits of righteousness to be found in me ? If we have nothing more to exhibit than the leaves and blossoms of a religious profession, we may justly dread that sentence, " Cut it down ; why cumbereth it the ground ? "

It were absurd to attempt any imposition upon Jesus by a hypocritical show. He requires a sincere and uniform obedience ; nor will he be satisfied by the strongest declarations of high regard, where there is no intention to please him, no strenuous endeavours to do his will. Expressions of esteem are cheap : and are these all that you look for from your friends ? If you perceive in them a continual neglect of your wishes, and an opposition to your known interest, you will not credit their words. Nay, you will account them as your enemies, who with their mouths pretend a cordial attachment, the better to carry on some hostile designs against you. Accordingly, Jesus assures us that all those, who shall be found " workers of iniquity," shall be disowned by him in the great day, and sentenced to an everlasting separation from him, however they may be able to plead that they have been zealous advocates for his truth, eminent officers in his church, and possessed of distinguished gifts for the benefit of others. How tremendous is the declaration ! Can any more forcible argument be suggested, which may induce us to examine, with true seriousness of mind, What are we ? Does our conduct as well as our language evince an unfeigned regard to the Saviour ? Or

what reception may we expect from him when he shall come to exhibit every character in its true light, and execute an impartial judgment upon all ?

So solemn were the admonitions of Jesus to his hearers ! The close of the sermon may be considered as a practical application of the whole, and may furnish his ministers with an excellent model for their public addresses to the people. He separated and divided his audience into two classes ; and it will, in general, be proper and necessary to distinguish our congregations in the same manner.

There are those who make a suitable improvement of their religious instructions ; and they are to be encouraged by a representation of their happiness and security. They listen to the word of Christ ; and, moreover, they render an unfeigned obedience. Not satisfied with expressing their approbation, they desire that their conduct in every respect should be conformable to it. They are, therefore, anxious to know, chiefly in order that they may perform, the whole will of God. Herein they act a wise part ; and they shall reap the benefit. They build upon a sure foundation, which cannot be removed, and provide a place of refuge from the violence of impending storms. For such trials, probably, will soon come upon them, as will prove that they stand on firm ground, and that their house of defence is immoveably established. Is the ministry of the Gospel then precious unto us ? and are we giving heed to the precepts, as well as to the promises ? Our obedience, doubtless, is defective : but does the general practice of our lives evince our sin-

cerity? If so, being accepted of God according to his covenant, we shall be preserved in the hour of temptation, supported and comforted in the pains of dissolution; and in the solemn day of accounts, when the hope of the hypocrite shall perish, we shall maintain a holy confidence and joy before the presence of our Judge.

But there are those who constantly attend upon the word of God, and yet regulate not their conduct by it. It is proper to detect their hypocrisy, and, if, possible, to discover them to themselves, that they may be awakened out of the dreams of self-deceit, and alarmed by a faithful representation of their danger. They hear the sayings of Christ; and so far it is well: but they do them not. The preaching may please and astonish; but it has no practical influence upon their tempers and conversation, so that they continue as covetous, sensual, and malicious, as ever. How absurdly do they act! By their religious services they seem to be preparing a house of defence; and they flatter themselves with security. But the season is approaching when their folly will be exposed. Their building will not stand against those tremendous tempests which may be expected to arise. It has no foundation, for it is not established upon the Rock; and therefore the storms which beat upon it will level it with the ground, and bury them in the ruins.

And have we not occasion to lament, as Jesus did, that many seem to hear in vain? Many, who neglect not the ordinances, are remiss in the common duties of life. We rejoice to perceive their attention at church,

but grieve to observe no amendment at home. We solemnly warn them, then, not to trust to their professions of regard to Christ and his Gospel, nor to flatter themselves, on this ground, that they have provided a place of safety. The tempestuous day is coming, and wo be to all those who have built their house upon the sand! God "will lay judgment to the line, and righteousness to the plummet; and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding-place."* Horror and anguish inconceivable must ensue, when they, who "were exalted to heaven" in their religious privileges, "shall be thrust down to hell," to suffer the vengeance of eternal fire.

Such was the import of this awful, pointed, and awakening sermon on the mount. "The people were astonished at this doctrine:" and, as to many, this was all the effect produced. Yet what does it avail merely to express an admiration of the speaker, while the truth delivered is rejected with scorn? Soon will it be said, "Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish."† Justly, indeed, might the audience of Jesus be amazed: for so singular an Instructor never appeared. Probably in his manner he was remarkable, uniting a majestic dignity with the sweetest condescension. "For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the Scribes," who meanly sought the favour of the people. He issued out his commands, as possessing in himself the power of enforcing obedience, as their Lord, their Governor, and their Judge. Nor was the matter of his discourse less surprising,

* Isa. xxviii. 17.

† Acts xiii. 41.

the doctrine being in many respects sublime and mysterious, contrary, at least, to the sentiments usually advanced by their Rabbins.

Let all the hearers of the Gospel make the application to themselves. It is Jesus who yet addresses you by the mouth of his servants, and to him your attention is demanded. What influence, then, have the truths which are preached produced in your minds? You may have been astonished, but have you been truly converted, by them? Remember with whom ye have to do; it is One whom you cannot deceive. Though with demure appearance you tread his courts, if you work iniquity, he will search it out, and finally reject you with contempt and abhorrence. He spake on earth, and much more will he speak from heaven, "with authority," when he shall come with power and great glory, as the Judge of quick and dead. "But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth?"* There are those, who will "have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming."† But there are multitudes, even in his visible church, who shall then be overwhelmed with confusion, whilst he will pronounce the tremendous and irreversible sentence, "I never knew you: depart from me."

"The Lord grant unto us that we may find mercy of the Lord in that day!" Amen.

* Mal. iii. 2.

† 1 John ii. 28.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. XII.

Jesus healed a leper—retired into the wilderness—attended by Pharisees and doctors—cured a paralytic—called Matthew the publican—visited him, when many publicans were present—justified his disciples for their free and social manner of life.

IN every part of our Lord's public ministry, we shall find him attended, through his different movements, by immense multitudes. The doctrines which he preached, and the miracles which he performed, generally brought together a large concourse of people, though but few in comparison seem to have been cordially attached to him. Some were led by curiosity, or a desire to hear and to see any thing new and uncommon; others, oppressed with bodily diseases, applied to him for relief under their various complaints. Shall not we, also, in the present day, be induced to listen to the word which he hath commanded to be published, and come to him for that healing of our infirmities, which he alone can bestow? The Gospel of his grace is as wonderful and important as ever; and Jesus, who is exalted to his throne of glory, is not less powerful or compassionate than he appeared to be

during his abode on earth. Let us inquire, then, what are the truths which he hath delivered to his church? what the benefits which his hand confers?

Among the crowds which followed Jesus, after his sermon on the mount, was a poor unhappy man; "full of leprosy."* A malady this, which was peculiarly distressing; for, not to observe that it was most offensive, painful, and dangerous, the Jewish law excluded all persons infected with it from public worship, and from a free intercourse with society, forbidding them to dwell in any town. How wretched their situation! Here was one, who, being deeply impressed with a sense of his own misery, earnestly implored relief. When he saw Jesus, having heard of his character and wonderful works of mercy, he applied to him with much importunity, and with evident signs of real dependence, though, probably, not without a mixture of unbelief. He worshipped him, falling down on his face, and very ardently besought him to show his usual compassion. Fully confident of his power, yet doubtful of his willingness, to heal him, "Lord," said he, "if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean." What a picture of distress was here! An afflicted creature, deprived of the main comforts of life, shut out from friends and relations, loathsome in the sight of others, and burdensome to himself, despairing of obtaining deliverance from men, and now prostrate as an humble supplicant at the feet of Jesus! And did the Saviour ever turn away from such an object, or disregard such an application? No; his heart was ever susceptible of

* Matt. viii. 1—4. Mark i. 40—45. Luke v. 12—16.

the tenderest pity ; and, therefore, no sooner was the desire expressed, than it was granted in its full extent. Instantly, at his word, the malady was removed, and a perfect cure wrought. He upbraided not the leper's distrust, yet took an effectual method to remove it. To demonstrate that his grace is equal to his power, and that he is as ready as he is able to relieve every needy petitioner, he said, " I will ; be thou clean." Like the great almighty Sovereign, having all things at his command, " He spake, and it was done."

The circumstance here related represents the Saviour in the most amiable light, and holds forth encouragement to us to make known our requests, whatever our necessities may be. Are we not, in a spiritual sense, like this poor afflicted person ? Sin is the leprosy of the soul, which renders us unclean in every part, and unfit for the society of God and his saints. Do we perceive and lament the defilement and the danger of this disease ? Behold, a Physician is at hand ! In every miracle of Jesus we see an emblem of the works of grace which he performs for the deliverance and salvation of his people. You, who are bowed down with your distress, entreat his help. You have heard what he has done for others ; you believe, therefore, that he is able to save you ; and, though your faith may be weak, and the fear may arise in your minds, " perhaps he is not willing," yet come and make the experiment. Lie low at his feet, and lift up your prayer to him, " Lord, make me clean ;" and he will not disdain or reject you. You shall prove the healing virtue of his Spirit, and obtain such abundant mercy as to your own

apprehensions may appear impossible. He will reply to your petition, "I will; be thou clean."

The leper, being restored, was dismissed with a strict injunction not to divulge the case, till he had properly attested it before the priest, and offered the appointed sacrifices at the temple. The charge of secrecy might be given by our Lord, either that he might avoid all appearance of ostentation, or that he might prevent the malicious objections of the priests, who, probably, would have denied the reality of the cure, if they had previously heard of its Author; and he required a compliance with the Mosaic rites, that he might not be censured for contempt or disregard of the law. But the man who had been healed, perhaps in the transport of his joy and the warmth of his gratitude, published the miracle, which he was commanded to conceal. This excited the general notice of the neighbourhood; and great multitudes resorted to Jesus from all quarters, through the extensive fame which he had acquired.

The admiration of a multitude, however, was not what Jesus sought; for he had no vain or ambitious views; and therefore "he withdrew himself from them into the wilderness." And for what purpose? That he might secure some short season of retirement, which he might spend, without interruption, in meditation and prayer. How often are we reminded, from his example, of the necessity of such an occasional abstraction from the world! Be it, then, remembered, that, unless we are seriously attentive to secret devotion, our religion, and our usefulness too, will dwindle away. Those

who are much engaged in public life should consider their peculiar danger on this account: for, whilst they are always in a crowd, and distracted with a constant succession and hurry of secular avocations, how can the soul be properly regarded, or its vigour maintained? Nay, even those who are actively employed in the immediate service of God, as the ministers of his word, may expect to suffer some spiritual declension, if they neglect the private duties of the closet. They should not only be earnest and unremitting in their labours for the benefit of others, but endeavour to obtain fresh supplies of wisdom and strength, by renewed communications of grace, for their own use. The difficulty is, to secure a sufficient and suitable time. But we must learn of Jesus to watch our opportunities, and even insist upon them, by retreating from our necessary engagements and our kindest friends, that we may keep up our secret intercourse with God. Such is the pattern set before us: alas! how defective are the most eminent of his followers! In nothing, perhaps, do they fail more, than in the improvement of their leisure for devotional purposes. For is not this holy retirement too much neglected? and neglected because it requires the most lively spiritual affections, and flatters not the vanity of the mind, by exciting the admiration of others?

Jesus, however, was soon called forth again to public view and activity. Though it might have been pleasing to himself to have spent a longer season in solitude, he could not be unmindful of the multitudes who flocked after him, and therefore, for their sakes, he

returned to his former exertions.* Upon his coming back to Capernaum, immense crowds attended him, to whom he preached the Gospel. Amongst these were some persons of higher station, and more respectable appearance, than his common hearers; "Pharisees, and doctors of the law." It is but seldom that men of rank or consequence pay any serious regard to the word of God; and therefore we may be disposed to wonder that these made part of the congregation. But it is remarked of them, that "they were sitting by," as if they were totally unconcerned with his subject, and, like spies, meant only to observe and censure his conduct. They had travelled from distant parts of the country, even from Jerusalem, and, probably, met by appointment at Capernaum, not so much from curiosity, as from a malicious desire to start objections. We shall, therefore, remark, that they were ready to catch at his words. He was perfectly apprized of their intentions; yet, not discouraged by their presence, he proceeded in his work, and gave such proofs of his high character before them, by many miraculous cures, as were enough to convince or confound them.

The ministers of Christ are often placed in a similar situation, being surrounded by those who are unfriendly, and disposed to find fault. Such hearers may properly be said to be "sitting by;" for they come, not to be instructed, but to pass their judgment on the sermon; and, therefore, they criticise both the preacher and his doctrine with malevolence and severity. The servant of the Lord, however, though his feelings may

* Matt. ix. 1—8. Mark ii. 1—12. Luke v. 17—26.

be wounded, must still persist in the faithful discharge of his office, nor conceal any part of the truth, even while he knows that he shall excite opposition.

When Jesus was thus attended, a poor disabled paralytic was brought before him. The crowd about the house prevented all access ; but such was the eagerness of the afflicted man and his friends to obtain relief, that with great pains and difficulty he was taken up to the roof, and let down by cords, where our Lord was preaching.

Perhaps this particular method of application arose from ignorance and unbelief, as it seemed to imply that the Saviour could not work the cure at a distance. He did, not, however, upbraid them with their weakness ; but, considering their conduct as an evidence of faith, he received them graciously, and encouraged the palsied person by an assurance of the pardon of his sins. A blessing this, which does not appear to have been solicited or desired. But so free and extensive is the mercy of our God, that all, who apply to him with real sincerity of heart, shall find him “ able to do exceeding abundantly above all that they ask or think.”

The declarations of Jesus, which denoted his sovereign majesty and divine power, disposed his captious hearers to raise a formidable objection against him. They argued within themselves that he was guilty of the grossest impiety in the claim which he set up. Their position was true, that none can forgive sins but God alone ; yet their conclusion, that Jesus had spoken blasphemy, was false. They would not believe, though the clearest evidence was given, that he possessed the

perfections of Deity, and, therefore, that the forgiveness of sins belonged to him, as his high prerogative. He replied to the charge, even before they had dared to avow it, and thereby discovered his intimate acquaintance with their very thoughts. Who, then, can this be, that calleth men to account for the imagination of their hearts? To prove that he had not been guilty of a vain presumptuous boast, he proposed instantly to restore the poor cripple before them to health and vigour; and therefore, with all the majesty and authority of a divine Person, and with a view to show his full right to pardon offenders, he thus addressed the man, "I say unto thee, Arise, and take up thy bed, and go thy way into thine house."

The word was effectual; for immediately the paralytic received strength, so that he departed without assistance, ascribing glory to God. This excited a general amazement and consternation among the people. They cried out, "We have seen strange things to-day," as if they knew not what conclusion to draw; but the proper and just inference is, that Jesus possesses divine perfections in himself, and can dispense the remission of sins as he pleases. This must be a fair deduction, as the miracle seems to have been wrought on purpose to confirm it. And, when we hear of these astonishing events, shall we not rejoice "that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins?" If we have no palsy to be cured, it will not be said that we have no iniquities to be pardoned. Then let us consider our need of Jesus, and, instead of cavilling, as the Scribes and doctors did, let us implore his help.

While our consciences witness against us that our transgressions are very many, let us go to him with an humble reliance upon his mercy, and say, "Lord, thou only canst remove my load of guilt; extend thy compassion to me; assure me of thy favour; and speak peace to my soul, that I may depart with the deepest impressions of gratitude and love, glorifying God."

As Jesus retired from Capernaum towards the seashore, he fixed his eye upon a certain publican, named Matthew or Levi, who was busily employed in his occupation as a tax-gatherer, "sitting at the receipt of custom," and immediately called him to be his disciple.* The office of publicans was odious to the Jews, and, as their business exposed them to many temptations, they were generally persons of an infamous character; so that it became proverbial to join "publicans and sinners" together. But by our Lord's conduct we are taught to despise no man, whatever he may once have been. Jesus can pardon, and can sanctify: he disdains not to accept and save even those who have been most atrocious offenders; nay, he seems purposely to have chosen some of this very stamp, that he might display the greatness of his mercy, and encourage the hopes of all who are willing to submit unto him, however desperate their case may appear. In certain instances, we perceive, he has sought after them, without waiting for their application; and constrained them, by the discovery of his love and the influence of his Spirit, to forsake their beloved pursuits, and to follow him.

* Matt. ix. 9. Mark ii. 13, 14. Luke v. 27, 28.

Such, we apprehend, was the case of Matthew. He was immersed in all the hurry of an advantageous, though not an honourable, business, and probably had no serious cares or spiritual desires, when Jesus looked upon him, and required him to renounce his secular gains, and become one of his despised attendants. Many, also, among ourselves, who seem to have had no previous preparation of heart, no solemn consideration or convictions of religion, are suddenly awakened in the midst of various schemes of vanity and sin. A thought is darted in upon their minds, as quick and as effectual as the word spoken to Matthew, in consequence of which they immediately covet and seek for that acquaintance with Jesus, which they disdained before. The transition from one course to another is rapid: and the change in every view is truly wonderful. Yet, we see, it is easy for Him, who has access to the conscience, to produce it in an instant. The call given to Matthew, though urged by no motives or persuasions whatever, went with a powerful impression to his heart, and succeeded. He “conferred not with flesh and blood,” but obeyed the summons without hesitation, cheerfully relinquishing his lucrative post, and entering on the service of a poor and despised Master. “He arose, and left all, and followed him.” From that time he was numbered among the disciples of Jesus, and afterwards chosen to be an Apostle.

Some persons were prejudiced against our Lord, on account of the meanness, ignorance, and former immoralities of his attendants. The same objection is still made: and many are even exasperated when they hear

that those who have been profligate in their manners, or suspected in their characters, discover an ardent zeal for religion, and commence teachers of others. But, while the pride of Pharisees quarrels with the rich and sovereign mercy of God, "who will have mercy on whom he will have mercy," let us admire and praise the love and power of our Redeemer, "who justifieth the ungodly," and constrains the most rebellious, not only to submit, but to plead his cause and promote his glory. Let us inquire for ourselves, Are we the called of God in Christ Jesus? It matters little in what way, or by what particular means, this has been effected: but are we really influenced to follow the Saviour? Matthew, doubtless, was condemned for his conduct, as a weak or visionary enthusiast; nor need we wonder if we come under such censures for our attachment to Jesus. "Let us go forth, bearing his reproach," and be solicitous only to approve ourselves unto God.

Some time after this occurrence, we find the young convert entertaining his beloved Master at his own house. It may not be easy to fix the precise date of the visit; but it may be most suitable to consider it here, while Matthew's character is before us. Perhaps to show his grateful regard to the Saviour, and to recommend him to the notice and esteem of his former acquaintance, at least to give them an opportunity of receiving benefit from his conversation, he provided a large feast, and invited many publicans, and others of a similar stamp, to be present with Jesus.* We admire the condescension of this exalted Guest, who

* Matt. ix. 10—17. Mark ii. 15—22. Luke v. 29, &c.

was willing to mix with any company where there was a prospect of usefulness, and who, upon the occasion now mentioned, conversed in a familiar manner with persons of an ignominious reputation. But his conduct again called forth the enmity of the Scribes and Pharisees, who, with a pretence of superior sanctity, held all others in the utmost contempt, and were angry that favourable notice should be taken of any besides themselves. They seemed to insinuate that Jesus, by a free communication with men of an infamous character, appeared as the patron of iniquity. He replied, that he did not maintain an intercourse with them, as a partaker or encourager of their evil deeds, but from a real desire to save their precious souls, like an attentive physician visiting his patients, to heal and restore them. He observed that his business lay more properly amongst those, who readily acknowledged themselves sinners, than with those who boasted of their own righteousness, and disdained the offer of a Saviour. He intimated, that, while he showed a regard to the most abandoned, his object was "to call them to repentance;" and that herein he performed an act of mercy more acceptable to God than ceremonial observances.

The ministers of Christ are censured in the same manner, whenever they are followed, as is frequently the case, by persons who have been irregular and profligate in their conduct. It is suggested, if not openly asserted, that their doctrine is favourable to the purposes of licentiousness, as if it allowed men to continue in their evil practices. This is said, or hinted, by

those "who trust in themselves that they are righteous, and despise others." But we would admonish them that in such a temper of mind they are of all others most opposite to the Gospel, and furthest from the kingdom of heaven. "Many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first." The servant of Christ, therefore, like his Master, should be willing to pay attention to the most abandoned sinners, in the hope of reclaiming them; and he ought to rejoice when they accept the rich grace of that Gospel, which the proud Pharisee so contemptuously rejects.

Probably, at the same time, an objection was urged against Jesus, for the free and social intercourse which his disciples maintained, so very different from the disciples of John and of the Pharisees, who fasted often. He, however, justified their conduct, not by denying the duty of abstinence, but by observing that they would soon be called to it, in a season of peculiar affliction; and that, during his personal residence amongst them, the austerities of fasting and mortification would be unsuitable to their situation, as they were then rejoicing in the presence of the heavenly Bridegroom. He had, also, another reason to offer, which he illustrated by certain similitudes taken from the common concerns of life. Some of those, whom he had attached to himself had been strangers to that humiliation which would afterwards be necessary for them; and therefore, in a wise and compassionate regard to their weakness, and even to their former prejudices, he would not put them upon severe trials or duties, for which their strength was insufficient; but he designed to lead them on gra-

dually, as they were able to bear it. A different treatment might have had the worst effects, producing a dislike to his service, as rigorous and intolerable.

This exhibits a pleasing representation of the manner in which he now deals with his people. He proportions their difficulties to their ability. Many things both in doctrine and practice, to which they would violently object upon their first conversion, are by degrees accepted, approved, and admired. When they enter on the Christian course, they are generally favoured with peculiar consolations, and know little of those burdens by which others are oppressed. The Bridegroom is with them; and they rejoice in his presence. Indeed he never deserts them; but, as they advance in wisdom, strength, and courage, he calls them out to severer exercises; and then frequently the clear manifestations of his love are withdrawn from them, and they are weighed down with heavy afflictions and temptations. Such was the divine conduct towards the children of Israel, when they were led about through the wilderness, and not by the direct road to Canaan, and thus were gradually prepared for those sharp conflicts which they were destined to encounter.* Let us praise God for the methods of his grace, so exactly suited to the various cases of his people, and cheerfully commit ourselves to his care and disposal.

We observe what perverseness and "contradiction of sinners" our Lord endured, and with what meekness he replied to their malicious objections. We learn therefore, to abstain from all pride and vehemence of

* Exod. xiii. 17, 18.

spirit, and with patience to bear the folly and malignity of those who oppose themselves. Let us beware, especially, lest we be numbered amongst "the adversaries of the Lord." Are there not those who show the same cavilling temper of mind which the Pharisees did of old? Most awful indeed is your situation. He who suffered his enemies to raise their wicked contentions against himself, when he was upon the earth, may exercise much forbearance towards you; but he will soon reckon with you for your captious insolence in resisting his Gospel, and for your obstinate contempt of his grace. And "can your heart endure, or can your hands be strong, in the days that he shall deal with you?" O submit, nor dare any longer to maintain the vain and presumptuous contest! Refuse not to comply with his demands; and therefore come to him, as you are required, confessing yourselves on a level with publicans and saying, from the heart, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!"

J E S U S C H R I S T,

SECT. XIII.

Jesus celebrating the passover, cured an impotent man at Bethesda—called to account, declared his own dignity—stated the proofs of his divine mission—and subjoined the most solemn admonitions to his opposers.

It is generally supposed that our Lord celebrated four passovers during his public ministry; and that the circumstance, which we are now about to consider, occurred at the second. At the annual celebration of that great festival, he went up to Jerusalem, as the law commanded. He was constant in his attendance upon all instituted means; and his example teaches us not to slight or neglect the ordinances of God, since he, who could not stand in need of them, as we do, put such honour upon them.

When he came to Jerusalem, an opportunity soon offered for the exercise and display of his power and compassion.* A poor disabled man, who had remained in a state of entire impotency for thirty-eight years, lay at the pool of Bethesda, waiting in expectation of a cure from the miraculous motion of the water, which it pleased God to appoint at certain seasons, for the

* John v. 1, &c.

healing of the most inveterate diseases. Jesus looked with pity on this afflicted person, and, without receiving so much as a petition for relief (the cripple, probably, not knowing the Saviour's character), instantly by a word restored his strength: he commanded him, also, to give full and public proof of his recovery, by taking up his bed and walking.

The supernatural effect was manifest; and we might have thought the conclusion from it so obvious, that all must acknowledge it. But the superstitious Pharisees immediately objected, because the work had been performed, and the man had carried away his couch, on the sabbath-day. Hypocrites, we find, are generally attentive to outward observances, while they are content to be destitute of real religion in their hearts. The person who was cured rightly argued, that he, who had so wonderfully removed his disease, could not be supposed to require him to do what was sinful. They, however, probably suspecting that Jesus was the Author of the miracle, were desirous to bring him forward to public view, that they might accuse him. But, in the mean time, he had judged it proper, either through modesty or prudence, to retire from their observation before he was known. Afterwards the man met with Jesus in the temple, and received a solemn charge to take warning from his late visitation, and amend his conduct: having thus learned to whom he owed his deliverance, he reported it to the Pharisees. This he might do from a strong impression of gratitude, and an absurd expectation that all would pay the most profound deference and respect to his gracious Benefactor.

They ought, doubtless, to have sought after him, given him the homage and submission so justly due to a Messenger from heaven, and considered their nation highly honoured by his presence. But, on the contrary, they persecuted him with malicious rage, as if he were unworthy to live, for an imaginary and not a real violation of the sabbath.

The circumstance here related may repress our wonder, when we hear the basest misrepresentations of excellent characters and the most benevolent conduct. Those who are followers of Jesus must expect to pass through evil report as he did, and should not be staggered in their minds though they hazard the loss of every thing, even when they exert themselves most earnestly for the honour of God and the benefit of their fellow-creatures. "Though war should rise against them," let them "not be weary in well-doing."

For this compassionate act Jesus was called to account, probably in a public manner, and, as it should seem, before the sanhedrim, the great council of the nation. There he stood arraigned as a criminal; and yet, when put upon his defence, he spake as the sovereign Lord of all, possessing full authority to condemn and destroy his accusers. With an inexpressible dignity he declared, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work;" as if he had said, "My Father is continually carrying on his works of providence, and ceaseth not on sabbath-days from exercising his almighty power for the support of the creation; and since I likewise, maintain the same dominion, and act in the same absolute manner, I am not to be restrained and limited in

iny operations by those rules which must direct the conduct of creatures." If this be, as it evidently appears, the fair import of his words, we wonder not that the Jews, who were determined to deny his divinity, considered him as a blasphemer, in making himself "equal with God." This charge, therefore, they immediately urged; and he replied without fear or reserve. He took occasion from it to enter upon a full vindication of himself, asserting the high dignity of his character, and the offices he sustained, and warning them of their danger in opposing him. The whole of his speech is inconceivably sublime, especially if it be understood to be addressed to the rulers of the people, collected in their grand assembly, and sitting in judgment upon him.

Had they mistaken his words, or drawn a false and mischievous conclusion from them (as they certainly did, if he be not very God), he would instantly have corrected the error, and explained his meaning more explicitly. But, so far from contradicting, he allowed and confirmed their inference. For he proceeded to declare, that, "what things soever the Father doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise," not only performing the same operations, but conducting them in the same manner, with an equal display of supreme and sovereign authority. And is it not, then, a fair deduction, that the Father and the Son, who are confessedly united in their plans of action, are one in nature, and possess the very same perfections? He referred them to some stronger testimonies of his omnipotence than had already been given by the cure of the lame man;

and observed, that in two particular instances his dignity, as the Son of God, would be manifested, to their astonishment. The one was, his restoring of life to the dead, according to his own pleasure ; for, even now, he quickens whom he will, and at the last day the general resurrection will be accomplished by him. The other was, the administration of the final and universal judgment, which is committed to him ; for he it is who will assign to the whole human race their different states for ever, according to their respective characters. Are these such works as a creature can perform ? Or do they not evidently require the exertion of divine perfections ? Jesus, therefore, added, that in these acts it is the Father's grand determination to assert and vindicate the proper dignity of his Son ; that, notwithstanding the insolent attacks made upon him, he commands all men to honour the Son, even as they honour the Father ; and that whatever regard is withheld from the former, is, in effect, denied to the latter. Of what sort, then, is their religion, who are attempting the degradation of the Saviour ? With all their pretences of veneration for the God of heaven, they are here expressly declared to be his enemies.

Accordingly, the Lord Jesus, in the most solemn manner, demanded the attention of his judges, representing himself as the grand source of all spiritual blessings, and requiring them to submit to and depend upon him, as the Author and Giver of everlasting life. To fix a deeper impression on their minds, he set before them the awful proceedings of the last day, when they should hear his voice, awakening

them from their graves ; and stand at his bar, to receive their final sentence from his mouth.

It is objected to the doctrine, which asserts his Deity, that he said on this very occasion, " I can of mine own self do nothing ; which is thought to imply an original subjection and inferiority. But we apprehend that no such conclusion can be fairly drawn from his expressions. True it is that " the Son can do nothing of himself ;" that is, he can have no distinct plan of his own, nor act separately from, or in opposition to, the Father ; such is their union and perfect agreement together.

But does not Jesus describe himself as subordinate and dependent ? Doubtless there is a sense in which he is so. He speaks of a commission which he had received, and of an authority with which he was intrusted, from the Father. But this may properly be referred to his mediatorial office, and does not prove any difference or inequality, previous to his own voluntary engagement. In the function which he has assumed, he submits to be a servant, and acts by express directions. " Because he is the Son of man," having taken our nature, and appeared in the likeness of sinful flesh, he is, in this respect and for this very reason, inferior to the Father, and is sent and appointed by him. Yet the character he sustains, and the acts he performs, as Mediator, clearly manifest his divinity, since they far exceed the powers of every created being in earth or heaven.

Are we, then, in danger of rendering too much honour to Jesus, or of exalting him higher than he de-

serves? Who does not tremble at the suggestion? But have we indeed obtained suitable conceptions of his dignity? and are we habitually giving him the glory which is his due? Let us fear, lest we come under the condemnation of those "who honour not the Son." If we are disaffected, and unwilling to pay him profound and supreme adoration, we are fundamentally and dangerously wrong. It is indispensably required, that, as we believe in God the Father, we should also believe in his Son Jesus Christ.

He proceeded to state certain decisive proofs, in support of the claims which he made. Our reason is appealed to, in confirmation of our faith: and evidence, in abundance, may be adduced, to convince us that our holy religion is no foolish fancy, or base imposition. The Gospel does not evade, but challenges and demands, a fair inquiry. Accordingly, Jesus did not rest the matter upon his own mere assertions, which might appear suspicious, but showed, by a variety of arguments, that he was the very Person whom he declared himself to be.

He appealed to the testimony of John the Baptist, who had seen the Spirit of God descending in an open manner upon him, and heard a voice from heaven affirming his high character. To him they had once appeared to pay attention, and had sent a deputation to consult him; and yet they would not abide by his decision.

He referred them to his own miracles, in attestation of his divine mission. He had performed such wonderful works as no human power ever could effect:

these, therefore, sufficiently evinced that he could not be a deceiver, but was, indeed, what he had uniformly maintained, the Saviour that should come into the world.

He alleged that his Father himself had borne witness of him : He had done it, not only by the communication of extraordinary gifts, but by an express declaration that Jesus was his beloved Son. Such an evidence as this had not been vouchsafed on any other occasion. Yet to what purpose was it then given ? Alas ! it rendered many the more inexcusable for their unbelief, as they hardened their hearts against conviction.

He directed them, likewise, to the testimony of the holy Scriptures. These were the writings of the Old Testament, which they all acknowledged, and professed to receive with the highest regard. To these divine oracles he made a solemn appeal, in vindication of his own claims, and exposed the inconsistency of pretending reverence for the sacred records, and at the same time rejecting the Saviour, whom they all concurred in pointing out. The inspired authors are witnesses of Christ, either by types, promises, or prophecies ; and since Jesus has exactly fulfilled those ancient descriptions, they illustrate and confirm his declarations. How strange is it, then, that any, who have the Bible in their hands, should remain in ignorance of him ! How absurd and sinful is the general inattention of men to the important contents of that book, which they allow to be a revelation from heaven !

Thus Jesus endeavoured to convince the Jews of his character and mission, and of the justice of those claims which he advanced. And are not we also interested in the subject? Do we, then, receive Christ Jesus the Lord, as he is set forth before us? Do we unfeignedly bow to his authority, and confess him to be "the Lord from heaven," "God over all?" Much has been said and written about the want of evidence; the same outcry was raised amongst the unbelieving Jews, "What sign showest thou?" This question was urged again and again, even where proofs in abundance were produced. And nothing is more common than for those, who are determined not to be persuaded, to allege that no decisive arguments are brought, to gain them over to the side of Christianity. It is preposterous that men should make this complaint, and affect to be ready to give every testimony its due consideration, when we know that they refuse to examine with serious attention; nay, that they contemptuously shut their eyes and stop their ears against every thing which opposes their favourite scheme. We doubt not that the grand cause of infidelity is insincerity, and an extreme inveterate depravity of heart. And such reasons as these do not form an excuse for free-thinkers, but rather furnish the grounds of their condemnation. Observe, then, from what source your objections to the Christian doctrines arise; and fear lest you should not conduct your religious inquiries with diligence and honesty, with meekness and solemnity. That your minds may be more deeply impressed with the importance of the subject, weigh carefully the conclu-

sion of our Lord's address, in which he subjoins the most pointed admonitions.

In our application to men who are utterly careless and indifferent, we must not content ourselves with cold reasoning, but endeavour to alarm their consciences, or else the strongest arguments will fail of their effect. Thus Jesus, upon the occasion before us, attempted to rouse his hearers, and to work upon their hearts, by a plain and faithful representation of the nature, malignity, and danger, of their sin. As it is probable that some persons of a similar character and disposition may cast their eyes upon these pages, we would earnestly entreat their serious regard to the considerations here suggested.

He warned and reprov'd his opposers, because they acted in contempt of his unparalleled kindness, and most gracious offers of salvation, when their own final perdition must be the consequence. He declared that he courted not their favour through ambitious views, and that their destruction would be entirely owing to their obstinate refusal of submission to him. His knowledge of their very thoughts and motives enabled him to detect their hypocrisy; and therefore he observed that their treatment of him fully proved, notwithstanding their professions of regard to God, that their hearts were not under the influence of divine love. That principle would have led them to receive him, who addressed them in his Father's name, and sought nothing but his Father's glory. So likewise will all our pretences either to devotion or morality be found vain and insincere, if we neglect the great Saviour of the world.

He condemned them for their anxiety to procure respect and empty titles of honour from their fellow-creatures, while they felt no real concern about the favour and approbation of God; declaring, that, in such a state of mind, they could not exercise any proper reliance upon him as the Redeemer. How solemn is the thought! The faith of Jesus cannot consist with ambition, or a foolish fondness for human applause. Those, therefore, whose grand desire and aim is to be admired and advanced among men, are at once excluded from the number of his true disciples. He requires us to take up our cross, and to follow him through contempt and tribulation. Such as are unwilling to do this understand not his worth or their own necessities; and, of consequence, they cannot believe in his name.

He warned them, finally, that Moses, the great founder of their own religion, to whom they professed an unreserved submission, appeared as their accuser before God; and that, as they would be fully convicted on the charge of rejecting that prophet, there would be no need to bring any further testimony against them. They were condemned on their own principles. Moses had written much concerning the Redeemer, and represented his office, work, and character, by various rites and ceremonies: a real regard, therefore, to those ancient records, would have produced a cordial reception of Jesus, in whom the types and prophecies were fulfilled. Yet such was their astonishing ignorance and perverseness, that, with the Bible in their hands, they denied and persecuted the very Person of whom they were continually reading.

The address is applicable to others besides Jews ; to many among ourselves, who pretend to pay the highest deference both to the Old and New Testament, as the revelation of God. May we not ask, Do not these Scriptures contain the heaviest charge against you, while you oppose the authority of Christ, and despise his grace? And should you not, to be consistent, either totally reject the book of inspiration, or else change your own principles and practice? The sin of unbelief is generally thought of little consequence ; for it is presumed that men will not be finally condemned for mere opinions. But, from the representation here given, does it not appear that it includes the most complicated guilt? It is not barely an error of the judgment, but betrays an extreme depravity of heart. It is not a single offence ; for it is always accompanied with other base principles, and infallibly leads to every species of ill conduct.

Unhappy they, on whom this sin is chargeable ! who treat the Saviour, and his offers of mercy, with contempt ! O, consider how wretched is the state of your minds, while you discover the utmost disdain for infinite excellence, and repay the tenderest love with hatred ! Your wickedness is of a heinous nature, and highly aggravated. You despise “ the Lord of glory,” the Son of God, “ who thought it no robbery to be equal with God.” You pay no regard to the united testimonies of earth and heaven in his favour. You scorn the kindest and richest offers ever made to man. You are unwilling to bow to him, whom even angels worship, or to be indebted to him for the life of your souls,

when, alas! without him you must inevitably perish. You set light by his unparalleled condescensions and labours of love, and, in defiance of all admonitions and threatenings, are rushing on, with steady course, to certain and everlasting damnation.

It is proper, by these repeated warnings, to call your attention to your own perilous condition. But how little effect is produced by such solemn reproofs! Probably, after our Lord's address, his accusers and judges were silenced, and restrained by an awful impression upon their minds from proceeding to any act of violence against him. So possibly may you, who are his avowed opposers, for a season at least, be convinced and alarmed by these faithful representations of your guilt and danger. You may seem to relinquish your objections, and yet persevere in unbelief, and be destroyed for ever. Most tremendous thought! May it please God, not only to awaken your fears, but to subdue the enmity of your hearts! Then you will not cease to pray, "O Lord, fulfil in us all the good pleasure of thy goodness, and the work of faith with power!"

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. XIV.

Jesus replied to the objections of the Pharisees against his disciples for plucking the ears of corn, and vindicated himself for healing the withered hand on the sabbath-day—performed various cures—spent a whole night in prayer—chose twelve apostles—and repeated certain passages of his sermon on the mount.

THE history of Jesus exhibits the highest excellence of character, labouring under the most malignant misrepresentations, contempt, and opposition. His life was one continued series of actions denoting fervent zeal for God, and pure benevolence to man. We might have thought that such exalted goodness could not meet with enemies, or would soon disarm their malice. But it was otherwise; and the fact incontestably proves the extreme depravity of human nature. While this depravity remains, a conduct like that of Jesus will always excite disgust. Let it, however, be our only care to tread in the steps of our Lord and Saviour, regardless of all temporal inconveniences which may follow. A wicked world may hate and defame the truly religious; but He, whom they serve, will soon

plead their cause, and even now "Wisdom is justified of her children."*

Various objections were urged against Jesus; for he was surrounded by perverse and malevolent persons, who watched him with close attention, and sought occasions to accuse and reproach him. Very frequently, therefore, he had to stand upon the defensive, and reply to the petulant cavils of his adversaries. A common subject of complaint was, that he did not pay a proper regard to the sabbath; because he ceased not from acts of kindness and mercy on that day. The proud and superstitious Pharisees, who placed all their religion in external observances, endeavoured to represent him as a profane despiser of divine institutions; yet the case was, that he neglected no ordinance of God, but did not conform to their fanciful and traditional explanations of the law.

His disciples accompanied him on his return from Jerusalem, soon after the passover, and, as they walked through the fields, finding the calls of hunger, they began to pluck the ears of the corn, which grew about their path.† The dictates of necessity, however, were no apology to the insidious attention and watchful malice of their enemies. It happened to be the sabbath; and immediately the objection was ready, "Behold, they do that which is not lawful to do upon the sabbath-day." The thing itself was expressly allowed;‡ but the particular time, and perhaps some concomitant cir-

* Matt. xi. 19.

† Matt. xii. 1--8. Mark ii. 23--28. Luke vi. 1--5.

‡ Deut. xxiii. 25.

cumstances of the action, gave the offence. It might be that the very rubbing of the ears of corn was represented as a kind of labour unsuitable to that sacred season.

Our Lord, who will maintain the cause of his people against their accusers, replied to the charge, and vindicated the conduct of his disciples by the example of David. That holy man, in a case of pressing necessity, took the shew-bread out of the house of God on the sabbath, for the support of himself and his attendants; an action, which in any other situation would have been highly sinful. To save life is more pleasing to God than the observance of any merely positive institutions; for, as Jesus argued, our gracious God has declared that "he will have mercy and not sacrifice;"* that is, when they interfere with each other, the former must have the preference, and the latter be dispensed with. From this part of the defence we are led to remark and admire the faithful and zealous attachment of his followers, who cheerfully exposed themselves to hunger, that they might wait upon him, and enjoy the benefit of his divine instructions. We are not aware how many and extreme difficulties they endured; and, probably, we should not have known their distress on this occasion, had it not been requisite to offer an excuse for them. But where do we now perceive such a regard to Jesus as disposes men to suffer in his service? In general, many withdraw upon the first appearance of hardships, and "walk no more with him." Like birds

* Hos. vi. 6.

of passage, they abide not the winter, but depart when storms approach.

Our Lord alleged, likewise, that, as the priests were allowed to perform certain laborious offices on the sabbath, in their attendance upon God, so his disciples might be permitted to do that which was necessary to enable them to wait upon Him. To make this reason good, he asserted his own sovereign authority, declaring that "the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath-day." The important truth demands our serious consideration. The appointment itself, of one day in seven to be dedicated to holy purposes, is derived from the Lord Christ. He instituted it at the creation, when he rested from all his works; He renewed it at the delivery of the law from Mount Sinai; and He, who ordained, has a right to suspend, to modify, or alter it, as he pleases. It was, therefore, a sufficient vindication of his followers, in the circumstances now mentioned, that they acted in his service, and by his permission.

It becomes us, also, to regard "the Son of man" as "the Lord of the sabbath." In this view, we should observe that sacred season out of obedience to his command, and seek the enjoyment of his presence and favour, as its grand object. We believe it to have been agreeable to his will, if not by his express directions, that a change should be introduced, and that the first, instead of the last, day of the week should be kept holy to Him. This is now distinguished by a new and more honourable name, "the Lord's day:" He claims it as his own, in a peculiar manner, and has laid us

under fresh and greater obligations to sanctify it, by rising from the dead, and blessing his church with the miraculous effusions of his Spirit, on that very day. In this alteration it is not implied that the sabbath itself is abrogated, or that any thing is taken away essential to the original institution, which prescribes such a portion of our time to be set apart for God. But rather, according to this representation, if Jesus be "the Lord of the sabbath," the appointment is confirmed, and its continuance among Christians ordained by him.

Soon after the incident last mentioned, we find him combating the same or similar objections. "On another sabbath," probably in some city of Galilee, he attended the public worship of God at the synagogue, as his custom was; and there also he took the opportunity of teaching the people.* Here again we are instructed to be thankful that we have a house of prayer, to which we can resort, and that divine ordinances are administered among ourselves, much more valuable than those which Jesus frequented. But how are we followers of Him, if our place be generally vacant, if by our absence we show that we care not for the sacred service?

In the midst of the congregation sat a poor man, whose right hand was withered, and, therefore, utterly disabled for labour. From the known benevolence of Jesus, and his former miraculous cures, the Pharisees expected that he would heal the cripple, and narrowly observed him for that very purpose, that they might charge him with a direct profanation of the sabbath.

* Matt. xii. 9—21, Mark iii. 1—12, Luke vi. 6—11.

He was aware of the perverse reasonings and malicious intentions of their hearts, which they had not expressed ; yet he was not discouraged. He therefore called forth the man, whom he had beheld with compassionate regard ; and then they asked with some subtlety, that they might insnare him by the question, whether it would not be a violation of the holy rest to perform any cures on that day. He replied, however, that all exertions of real mercy were perfectly allowable, and that they must be strangely inconsistent to extend relief, as they commonly did on their sabbaths, even to their sheep in danger or distress, and yet obstinately refuse it to one of their own species. This was not all ; He knew that they entertained a secret design of murdering him, while they objected to his works of kindness. Accordingly, by a solemn appeal to their consciences, he detected their hypocrisy, and confounded their malevolent purposes. He called upon them to say, whether it was more suitable to the object of that sacred season “to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it :” and instantly they were convicted and silenced. He felt a holy indignation and grief, on account of the obduracy of their hearts ; and, looking round about upon them all, that he might command their attention, he spake the word with an inexpressible majesty, and the cure was performed.

Did they not then, relinquish their opposition to him, when they saw such an incontestable proof of his divine power ? Did they not all acknowledge, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God ?” Ah ! the desperate wickedness of man ! We can scarcely con-

ceive greater depravity than that which is here exhibited : they departed in a rage, and immediately consulted together how they might destroy him. Being apprized of his danger, he retired to the sea of Galilee : and, there, not discouraged by the designs of his enemies, he continued to prosecute his important work. Immense multitudes from various and distant parts of Judea followed him ; and many amongst them, oppressed with divers diseases, experienced the virtue of his healing hand. But, to avoid all appearance of ostentation, and that he might not still further incense his opposers, he took particular pains to prevent the accounts from being dispersed abroad. Thus, by his kind attention to the weak and distressed, and his gentle unassuming deportment, he fulfilled the prophetic description of his character given by Isaiah,* and proved himself to be the very Saviour that should come.

We may learn prudence and modesty from our great Exemplar ; and he will instruct us, also, to persevere in well-doing, whoever may set themselves to resist, or form malevolent intentions against us. But let us fear the awful state and condemnation of his adversaries. How vain and detestable are their schemes ! Their best-concerted plans will be baffled, and themselves covered with their own confusion. Yet, we apprehend, disaffection to Christ prevails among ourselves, as certainly as it did with the Pharisees of old : and it is requisite for us all to inquire, if we are not, in one respect or another, actuated by a similar spirit. What, then, will the issue be ? What can you expect in prosecuting a

* Isai xlii. 1---4.

contest against Him, who has all power in his hands? O "kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little!"*

It should seem, that, even in our own times, some unfair and mischievous conclusions have been drawn from our Lord's conduct upon the sabbath, and his vindication of himself. Many think themselves authorized to pursue their worldly projects of business and pleasure. But is there any thing in what he has said or done to countenance such a practice? Do we perceive in him any contempt of the sacred day? Or can we infer more from his example than this, that works of piety, charity, and necessity, may be attended to? We ask, then, Are these the only calls which you regard on the season set apart for holy rest? Have you not taken pains to explain away all obligations to a strict and serious observance of the sabbath; as if, at least, the Gospel had so far released you from them. that every man is now at liberty to prosecute his own plans, as he is led by interest or convenience, by fashion or inclination? You may inveigh against superstition; but are you not, in this way, pleading for profaneness? We are aware that infidels are desirous to throw down that strong barrier of religion, the sanctification of every seventh day; this being effected, there is nothing to prevent the floods of impiety and wickedness from overflowing and desolating the world. Should we not, then, on our part, make a bold stand against every such attack, and maintain the important duty of devoting to the Lord, without abatement, that

* Psal. ii. 12.

portion of our time which he requires? And can we help lamenting that so many, who profess to be followers of Jesus, habitually neglect and shamefully violate the duty? We see them deserting the house and ministry of God, ready to join in every scheme of idleness, vanity, and dissipation, or else so engrossed with secular cares, that their thoughts and affections cannot be raised to any higher objects; and yet they wish to be complimented as good Christians. How strange and grievous an inconsistency is this!

The same ardent zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of men continued to actuate the Saviour through each part of his life. Intending to appoint certain persons, out of his constant attendants, to the Apostleship, he previously retired for secret prayer to a mountain, where probably an oratory was erected,* that he might engage the divine blessing upon the institution; and so fervent was his devotion, that he remained all night in the same spiritual exercise.† A whole night spent in importunate supplications to God! Ah! at how great a distance do we stand from this eminent example! Would not a single hour, so employed, seem a weariness to us? Yet surely we must allow the propriety and necessity of consecrating some portions of our time to the same pious purpose. Especially, when our minds are fixed upon any important scheme or undertaking, a more than common length of holy retirement, and an unusual earnestness in prayer, will be requisite, that we may proceed with right prin-

* *Prid. Connect.* vol. iv. p. 557.

† *Mark* iii. 13--19, *Luke* vi. 12--19.

ciples, and prevail with our God to assist and prosper us. And can there be a business of greater moment than the ordination of persons for the sacred ministry ?

After such a preparation, very early in the morning Jesus called together his disciples, or stated followers, who by their previous acquaintance with him had been in some measure trained up for the service ; and out of them he chose “ whom he would :” as Lord of his own kingdom, he appointed twelve, who were to act like chief officers, or principal ministers, under him. These he named **APOSTLES**, that is, messengers, intending, after further instructions, to send them forth with full powers and credentials to declare his will and publish his Gospel throughout the world. He might, probably, fix upon this exact number, from its answering to the number of the tribes of Israel, that, as the Jewish church was derived from the twelve sons of Jacob, so the Christian might be founded and established by means of twelve persons, as the heads and fathers of it. We rejoice and give thanks for the benefit of their labours, which extends even to us ; for through them the salvation of God has been made known to distant lands and successive generations ? and the truth of their doctrine is confirmed with a strength of evidence, which no assaults of our adversaries can shake.

The office of the Apostleship was extraordinary, and therefore not designed to be perpetual ; but there is a general and constant necessity for the common functions of the ministry, which, accordingly, will be continued to the end of time. Let prayer be made without ceasing unto Christ, who himself directs all the

affairs of his spiritual government, that he would raise up and ordain faithful pastors and teachers, and support and prosper them for the conversion of sinners, and the edifying of his saints. If He give the word, great will be the company of preachers ; and those who go forth at his call, and by his appointment, may be expected to labour to good effect. It seems especially requisite for them to be previously acquainted with Jesus, and furnished with their instructions from him, that they may be able to say, as he did, " We speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen." Yet even such persons, who are properly invested with the sacred character, stand in need of the constant intercessions of the church, that, by the divine blessing, they may " both save themselves, and those that hear them.

When the Apostles had received their commission, Jesus came down with them into the plain ; and he was immediately surrounded, as usual, with vast multitudes imploring relief. At his command their various diseases were expelled, and the causes of their distress removed. So freely and extensively did he manifest his power and compassion, that none solicited his help in vain ; " for there went virtue out of him, and healed them all." We wonder not that those, who are oppressed with affliction, supplicate deliverance. In general, men feel an acute sense of their bodily wants, and importunately beseech others to assist them. But sin hath induced a dreadful stupor upon our souls ; in consequence of which few perceive or lament their spiritual necessities, or consent to apply for that remedy,

which Jesus alone can bestow. O, flock around him, you who are bowed down with a conviction of your guilt and depravity, and who know from your own painful experience that you "are wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked!" Come, and he will supply all your need. Let your faith bring you to him; and the influence of his grace shall work effectually in you, to cure your spiritual maladies (for virtue still goes out of him), and you shall be able to bear witness of his mighty energy, even as the multitudes who were now around him.

Nor were the doctrines of Jesus less salutary than his miracles. When he descended from the mountain with the Apostles whom he had lately chosen, and a numerous assembly of other persons resorted to him, he took the opportunity of delivering the most important instructions and exhortations both to his particular attendants and to the people at large. His address upon this occasion contains a repetition of certain remarkable passages of the sermon which he had preached some months before, probably in a distant place, and to a different audience. As that sermon has been already considered, it may be sufficient briefly to suggest the principal topics on which our Lord insisted at this time; not as if they were of small moment, but because they have so lately engaged our serious meditation.

With a view to encourage his true disciples, and perhaps those more especially whom he had just appointed to the sacred function, "he lifted up his eyes on them," as if rejoicing over them, and expressing for them his

peculiar affection. He then described their character, their exalted privileges and happiness, notwithstanding all they might suffer, and, with the language of authority as well as love, pronounced them blessed. This is perfectly applicable to his sincere followers in every age. They are "poor," it may be, in worldly things, as they certainly are "in spirit;" but they are the favoured subjects of Christ's kingdom; and heaven, with all its bliss and glory, shall be their inheritance. They may suffer the extremity of want, so as to be destitute of food, for the sake of the Gospel, after the blessings of which they "hunger," more than for their necessary support; but they shall be supplied with every thing truly good, and satisfied with all spiritual enjoyments. They may endure much distress upon earth, oppressed with penitential sorrow, no less than with the calamities of life; but the time of their deliverance and exultation is at hand. They may be treated with hatred and contempt, and separated from the society of their nearest friends; but on this very account they ought to rejoice and triumph, because the Lord God hath conferred an honour upon them, and will distinguish them with marks of peculiar regard, at the resurrection of the just.

But, turning to others of an opposite character, he described their awful case, and denounced the most tremendous woes against them. Let those in the present day, who are destitute of true religion, hear their doom declared, and fear for themselves. They perceive not their need of any spiritual blessings, nor feel any ardent desires to obtain the grace revealed in the Gos-

pel. Whatever temporal advantages, therefore, or sensual pleasures, they may now enjoy, they are wretched, since they "have neither part nor lot in this matter." Possibly they may abound in wealth, and be able to command every gratification which a carnal heart may covet ; they may live in splendour, gaiety, and dissipation ; they may be admired and applauded amongst men : but the day of their calamity is coming ; for their expiring breath will conclude all their comfort and their glory ; nor can any thing await them beyond the grave, except tribulation and anguish, shame, and everlasting contempt.

After such alarming declarations, Jesus proceeded to deliver various precepts, which prove the peculiar holiness of his religion, and are of general use to all his professed disciples, for the regulation of their tempers and conduct.

He enjoined the exercise of forgiveness and love towards the most violent and malignant persecutors : together with the practice of universal and disinterested benevolence. But to return kindness for injuries, blessings for curses, how opposite is it to the pride, envy, anger, and resentment, of our fallen nature ! To do good, without the prospect of present recompense or advantage, and without exception of persons, how contrary to the selfish contracted notions of men ! Yet only by such enlarged beneficence can we prove ourselves to be partakers of the grace of Christ, and the children of the Highest, who extends his benefits to all.

He gave cautions about judging and reprovng others

There are cases, in which it may be proper and necessary to undertake that unpleasant office: but we should be sure that the occasion demands it, and that we do it not rashly or severely, or from an arrogant, censorious, or malicious disposition. Upon this head our Lord intimated the danger of following "blind guides;" and, as we are generally much influenced by our teachers, we should beware lest we attach ourselves to those who do not feel or understand the mild and liberal spirit of Christianity. Yet, while we look to others, we should not forget ourselves, but rather begin the work of reformation there: for, except we perceive, condemn, and correct our own faults, we are incompetent to decide upon the characters and conduct of others.

He enforced the necessity of proving a professed regard to him by a holy life. As the fruit determines the nature of a tree, so the habitual tendency of our action, words, and tempers, will best discover the state of our hearts towards him. By such marks, then, we must examine whether we are truly united to Christ, and renewed by his grace. To what purpose shall we make a show of high respect for him, while we live in an uniform course of disobedience? How striking his reproof, "Why call ye me Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" Such compliments he considers as the grossest insult; yet how generally has that insult been put upon him! Not a few in every age have pretended the most ardent affection, and have been forward to give him every proper title and expression of honour, who have not submitted to his authority. Let us beware of this fatal delusion.

He represented the difference between the sincere believer and the unsound professor of the Gospel. They differ most widely from each other, both in their present practice, and in their final condition. The sincere believer comes to Christ, receives with an humble mind the doctrines of grace and, by an exemplary life, proves that the word which he has heard has produced its right influence upon him. His trust is built on an immoveable basis : " the Rock of ages " is the sure foundation on which he rests. Trials and temptations, like heavy storms, may beat upon him ; but nothing shall be able to overthrow his hope, or disappoint his expectation. The hypocrite may listen to, and perhaps zealously contend for, the pure system of the Gospel ; but he advances no further. He depends on his accurate notions and distinctions, or his compliance with the forms and ceremonies of religion, while he feels not its inward energy. He will, therefore, be left defenceless and unsupported in the day of his calamity : " the overflowing shower " of divine indignation shall suddenly cast him down, and sweep him away into everlasting destruction.

Such were the solemn admonitions of the Saviour. They have been offered to our notice before ; but surely we may bear the repetition of them again and again. They are at all times interesting, seasonable, and necessary. May they lead us to a strict and impartial examination of our own hearts ! What, then, is our character ? what our expectation beyond the grave ? If we call ourselves the disciples of Jesus,

what is the regard we pay him? Do we give him any thing more than a bare compliment? Or are our affections and general habits regulated by an unfeigned obedience to his will? What benefit do we derive from hearing the Gospel? Or what fruits of righteousness do we produce? These important inquiries naturally arise from the subject before us; and they claim our most serious consideration. Let us examine the foundation on which our edifice rests, since we are building for eternity. How terrible will be the confusion of the ungodly, when "the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow their hiding-place!"* But may we, "being rooted and grounded in the love of Christ," stand fast in the faith against every assault on earth, and then appear at the last awful day with confidence and exceeding joy, through the merits and mediation of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ! Amen.

* Isa. xxviii. 17.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. XV.

Jesus healed a centurion's servant—raised a widow's son to life—testified of John the Baptist—lamented over the impenitent—encouraged the contrite—dined with a Pharisee, and vindicated the woman, who stood as a mourning penitent at his feet.

AMONGST the various incidents which meet us in the life of Jesus, none will be found of a trifling or uninteresting nature. Every thing in this history is extraordinary, and replete with instruction. Each step that we advance will furnish us with fresh proofs of his divine character and mission, and at the same time with renewed instances of his condescending and compassionate regard to our miserable and guilty race. May every view of him constrain us to cry out with admiration and gratitude, "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he hath visited and redeemed his people, and hath raised up an horn of salvation for us!"*

After the solemn address which Jesus delivered to his disciples in the audience of the people, he retired to Capernaum, his most usual residence.† Wherever he

* Luke i. 68, 69. † Matt. viii. 5---13. Luke vii. 1---10.

went, opportunities of exerting his benevolence were offered, and these he readily embraced. In this city, a man of good reputation, who, it should seem, attended the worship of the true God, a centurion, or a captain in the Roman army, having heard of Jesus, of his character, and the miracles he had wrought, applied to him to come and heal a favourite servant at the point of death. The Gentile soldier discovered a remarkable degree of humility and faith. Thinking himself unworthy to solicit the kind notice of so exalted a Personage, he prevailed on some of the principal Jews in the place to present and second his petition. Jesus, who was ever inclined to succour the afflicted, immediately consented to comply with their request. But the centurion, ashamed to give him the trouble, and conceiving it to be an unsuitable thing that he, a sinner and a Gentile, should receive such a Visitant in his house, believing also that Jesus was able to perform the cure at a distance, sent another deputation of his friends, and then at last went forth himself to meet him, entreating him to proceed no further, but only by his powerful word to command the health of the servant to be restored. "Even I," said he, "who am subject to the authority of another, yet, as I have soldiers under my control, no sooner issue out my orders than they are executed." More was implied than expressed; and the inference intended could be no other than this, "How much rather will every injunction of thine be instantly obeyed, since all creatures are subservient to thy will! No remoteness of place can be any obstacle to prevent the desired cure, if Thou shalt so ordain."

This was a signal instance of faith, in a stranger to the commonwealth of Israel. It was such, that our Lord declared his admiration, being superior to what he had yet found among the Jews themselves. And hence he took occasion to warn them, who boasted of their descent from Abraham, that many from the most distant parts of the earth, even of Gentile extraction, should obtain a distinguished rank in the kingdom of glory, whilst those, who presumed upon their exclusive right to it, should be condemned to a state of everlasting torment and despair. This conveys a suitable admonition to us. We observe that there is no situation or condition of life, however unfavourable, in which the grace of God may not produce eminent instances of real religion. And it should excite our thankfulness to meet with any one, under great disadvantages of education, and in the midst of many snares, like this officer in the Roman army, humbled with a deep conviction of extreme unworthiness, and entertaining high and honourable thoughts of Jesus. He did not stoop too low when he said, "Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof;" for the most exalted monarch in the world might properly adopt the same confession. And shall not we remember and acknowledge that we deserve no tokens of the Saviour's kind regard, and that, if He deign to visit us, it must be ascribed to his own wonderful condescension and mercy? But do we possess the faith of the centurion? Or, do we not, rather, distrust the power of Christ? We are favoured, not above the Gentiles only, but even more than the ancient Jews; so that we may be

called "the children of the kingdom." Yet have we not occasion to fear that many, who are destitute of our privileges, may rise up in judgment to condemn us? And would it not aggravate our misery to see them admitted into heaven, whilst we ourselves are excluded for ever?

The request of the centurion was granted, and his confidence in Jesus proved to be well founded. He was dismissed in peace, and his servant instantly restored to the full vigour of health, merely by the efficacious word of the great Physician. Nor will any be finally disappointed of their hope in Him. We should entertain large expectations, from a persuasion of his ability to save; and, by a strong unshaken faith in him, we shall infallibly secure his blessing to our souls.

After this miracle, it is probable that the fame of Jesus was celebrated still further, and that, in consequence, the number of his followers increased. The multitude, indeed, so pressed upon him, that he had no leisure to take proper refreshment: and so incessant was his attention to them, that his friends interfered, blaming him for an excess of zeal, and with much vehemence importuning him to desist from his labours, as injurious to himself, and even denoting a degree of insanity.* Peculiar occasions may justify and demand such ardent exertions as to some may appear needless and extravagant. Nay, the very fervency, which at all times becomes the servant of Christ, will be accounted by the world a sure mark of weakness or derangement of the faculties. But, compared with the vigorous

* Mark iii. 20, 21.

efforts of the Saviour, the most eager and strenuous endeavours of his people will seem to savour of lukewarmness and sloth. Indeed, we are not capable of activity like His.

He might so far yield to the solicitations of his friends, as to receive some nourishment, and then retire for the night ; but the next day he returned to his work again.* He took a journey of several miles, to the city Nain, accompanied by many attendants ; and there a fresh opportunity offered for the display of his high character. As he approached the place, a most affecting spectacle was presented. He met the solemn procession of a funeral : a distressed mother, who had been before bereaved of her husband, was now following her only son, her chief support and comfort, to the grave. As a man, our Lord felt the tenderest compassion for the afflicted widow, and, without any request from her or from others, interposed, on the mournful occasion, to wipe away her tears. But what consolation could he administer to one who seemed to have lost her all ? “ Is any thing too hard for the Lord ? ” He showed himself stronger than death : for instantly, with divine majesty and authority as the Almighty Lord, “ who quickeneth whom he will,” he spake the word, and the dead revived. He restored to the disconsolate woman her beloved child, in all the vigour of life ; and thus “ gave unto her, beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.”

* Luke vii. 11--17,

What an astonishing exhibition both of mercy and of might! We are at a loss to know which of them we should most admire. No wonder that an event so uncommon, and incontestably miraculous, impressed the minds of all the spectators with a serious awe, and constrained them to acknowledge that an illustrious Prophet had risen up among them, and that God had again visited his people. And shall not we, also, be struck with holy fear and reverence of the Saviour, while we contemplate his actions? Does not the occurrence before us clearly prove his divine mission? Why, then, do not all receive him, as coming from heaven to instruct and redeem his church? Alas! but few are convinced; our general convictions are very superficial. Many will not examine the evidence with serious attention, but, in proud or careless contempt, turn away both their eyes and their ears from the truth. Others, we observe with grief, though obliged by the strength of argument to assent to the Gospel, yet fail of that unfeigned and supreme regard which is due to Jesus. They may feel an impression of terror upon their minds, like the inhabitants of Nain, and confess that "a great Prophet is risen up," while they refuse to submit or listen to the doctrines which he delivers. How strange and fatal an inconsistency is this!

We have seen the tenderness of Jesus towards the poor widow: surely we shall learn, from the example, to look upon the afflicted with kindness and compassion, and stretch out our hands for their relief. But feeble, in comparison, is our pity; for, in many cases, our en-

deavours to remove or mitigate distress are ineffectual. Jesus alone can administer suitable and adequate assistance. O, fix your attention upon Him, you that are overwhelmed with trouble, whose "tears have been your meat day and night!" He can instantly turn your weeping into joy, and your complaints into loud thanksgivings, by accomplishing deliverance in a way which to you may seem impossible. For what cannot his power effect? Or what will not his love be disposed to grant, if really expedient for you? Death, indeed, may rob you of those who were the delight of your eyes and the desire of your hearts, and the grave may detain them; yet, under the pressure of this calamity, you are taught to rejoice in Jesus, as "the Resurrection and the Life," who will shortly break up the mansions of the dead, and restore to you every dear friend, who has departed in the faith, clothed with glory and immortality, to rejoice with you in his blissful presence for ever.

The report of our Lord's miracles, which was disseminated far and wide, was carried by the disciples of John to their honoured master, then in prison.* For their conviction, we suppose, rather than his own, the Baptist took that opportunity of sending them with an express message to Jesus, inquiring whether he were the very Messiah or not. In reply to their question, He condescended to give them the most satisfactory evidence, which might disperse every doubt, and probably induce them to attach themselves to Him, after John's decease. They beheld the wonderful exertions

* *Math. xi. 2. &c. Luke vii. 18—35.*

of his power and mercy ; for in their presence, while they stood before him, he healed all manner of infirmities, cast out devils, and restored sight to the blind. He referred them, therefore, to his works, for a decisive proof of his character, and directed them to carry a faithful relation to John of what they had seen and heard, that they might all perceive the ancient prophecies, concerning the Saviour of the world, to be fulfilled in him. At the same time he added, that it would be happy for them if they should not be staggered in their minds, or influenced by the prevailing prejudices and objections against him. It is of importance to ourselves, also, to be assured that Jesus is no deceiver, that he exhibited the strongest testimonies of his divine mission, and, therefore, that our faith rests on a sure foundation. Yet many reject him : and it is allowed that there are such things relating to him, his doctrines, and adherents, as may give offence to superficial and captious observers, and such as proud and sensual minds can never relish. In this view, blessed indeed are they who have themselves escaped or surmounted these difficulties, and who are not led away by the exceptions of others.

Our Lord took occasion, from the visit of John's disciples, to address the multitude concerning the Baptist, who had once been extremely popular among them. He spake of him in the most honourable terms, as being steadfast both in his preaching and practice, not easily shaken like a reed with the wind, not seeking the pomps of the world or sensual gratifications, but as a man of singular austerity and self-denial. He declared

him to be superior, in some respects, to all the ancient prophets, especially as being the harbinger of Messiah, and preparing the way for his reception. He remarked the peculiar ardour to which some had been excited by his ministry, who seemed as if they would gain an admission into the heavenly kingdom by a holy violence; and yet he lamented the awful condition of those who rejected both the Baptist, and the Saviour whom he came to introduce. He was led, therefore, to complain of the perverseness of that generation, who had discovered the most absurd prejudices against them, and who condemned the one and the other, though for different and opposite reasons; so that there appeared no prospect of obtaining any acceptance with them. They had refused their attention to John, on account of his austerities, as if he were a melancholy distracted man, under the possession of an evil spirit: and now they calumniated Jesus for the freedom of his intercourse with men of all characters, as if he were himself addicted to intemperance, and a patron of the dissolute and abandoned. Yet the Saviour rejoiced, that, amidst these various misrepresentations, there were those who perceived and approved the wisdom of their conduct.

The application to ourselves is obvious. Many, in our own day, betray a frowardness and malignity of temper similar to that of the ancient Pharisees. They are ever ready to take exceptions to the people and the ways of God, and that too on contrary grounds. The ministers of Christ, endued with different talents and dispositions, address them sometimes with one mode of exhortation, and sometimes with another; being so-

licitous to recommend the Gospel to their favourable regard by every method they can devise. But every method proves equally unsuccessful ; for now they are thought too rigid and morose, and again they are condemned for allowing too great a latitude of conduct. It were, therefore, vain for them, with the utmost prudence and circumspection, to expect to gain general esteem, or avoid reproach. Happy they, who are earnestly concerned to save their own souls, and are pressing, with a holy violence, into the kingdom of heaven ! They perceive the propriety and necessity of many things in religion, with which others are disgusted ; and, instead of being carried away with the torrent of general prejudice, they determine to adhere to the truth and service of God, however vilified in the most opprobrious terms.

On the occasion just mentioned, Jesus was induced to speak more largely, and with peculiar ardour of affection, while he lamented over the impenitent cities of Galilee, in which he had performed most of his mighty works. The meek and compassionate Saviour denounced one upon another against Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, and predicted the final and aggravated ruin which was coming upon them for their obduracy and contempt of the Gospel. Many, it should seem, of respectable character and abilities, remained in unbelief. This very circumstance has been thought an objection to the Christian faith. But surely, in this view, it appears that it was not a mere human system, or indebted to worldly policy for its support. The ways of God are in the deep : but we perceive it to be

His purpose to abase the pride and stain the glory of man; and when we observe that his salvation is hid from many of high attainments in literature, whilst it is revealed to some of inferior parts and mean rank in life, we are constrained to be silent in the dust, or rather, with the Saviour, to adore the sovereignty of the awful dispensation.

At the same time, however, to encourage those humble penitents, who, under a conviction of their guilt, might be ready to fear that the condemnation he had denounced would fall upon them, he represented his own supreme authority and divine perfections, commensurate to those of the Father, and then declared his peculiar tenderness and grace to such as might be bowed down with a sense of their sin and misery. He published the most kind and general invitation to all who felt a burdened conscience and sought deliverance, adding express and absolute assurances of pardon, peace, and salvation, on their unfeigned application and cordial submission to them.

We ask, then, What conceptions do you form of Jesus? what regard do you show him? Do objections arise in your minds, and prevent your cordial belief of the Gospel? But, after such proofs as have been adduced who shall complain of the want of evidence? Have you no apprehensions of the tremendous consequences of rejecting him? Shall Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, be condemned with accumulated woes for their infidelity, and you escape unpunished? Or, do you consider yourselves as utterly excluded from his notice, and incapable of receiving mercy, on account

of your extreme depravity and long continuance in sin? He speaks expressly to your case, and gives you direction and encouragement suited to your distress. O, keep not at a distance from Him, while he says, "Come unto me!" He will not disdain you, nor withhold his blessings from you. "He is meek, and lowly in heart," and therefore will condescend to your request, mean and worthless as you are. Only be willing, as teachable scholars, to take your instructions from him, and, as obedient servants, to fulfil his injunctions: you will not complain of the rigour of his demands, but experience them to be easy and delightful, and "find rest unto your souls."

Is it inquired, What was the consequence of our Lord's solemn address? Some might be deeply and properly affected, and others so much impressed as to be induced to show him an outward respect, without any cordial attachment. One person of this latter description, whose name was Simon, a Pharisee, invited him to dine at his house; and Jesus, who was an example of civility and kindness, and who sought opportunities of doing good in all places and among all characters, readily complied.* During his visit there, a singular circumstance occurred, which showed the ignorance and pride of the Pharisee, and the amazing grace and compassion of the Saviour. A woman in the town, who had been a notorious sinner, and, as it is supposed, infamous for her lewdness, heard where he was; and, probably emboldened by his assurances of mercy and peace to the mourning penitent, desired to

* Luke vii. 36--50.

give some testimony of her strong regard for him, and for that purpose prepared certain costly perfumes, with which she might anoint him. She was admitted into his presence, while he was at dinner ; and standing behind him, as he lay reclined upon the couch, she betrayed marks of extreme distress. The cause of it, evidently, was unfeigned contrition for her sins. She wept ; and her tears were so abundant, that the drops flowed down upon and bedewed the Saviour's feet. Perceiving where they fell, she stooped, and wiped them off with her dishevelled hair. Nor was this all : she could not refrain, even before the company, from expressions of ardent gratitude and love : she kissed his feet, and poured her rich ointment upon them, unmindful of its proper use, or not presuming to apply it to his head.

These signs of her fervent affection our Lord did not disdain, but received them favourably. The Pharisee, however, who looked on her with contempt, took offence. Lifted up with a proud conceit of his own goodness, he considered the very touch of the woman as carrying defilement, and concluded that a Prophet of God must not only know the baseness of her character, but instantly turn away from her with disgust. This disposition is not uncommon. Those, who have high thoughts of themselves, set up a kind of claim to the divine regard, and cannot bear that such as have been notorious offenders should be admitted to a share in that regard, or that any encouragement should be given to them, even when transformed and established "in newness of life." But how large is the grace, how

great the condescension, of Jesus! He did not scorn the poor weeping penitent, though she had been most abandoned, and long enslaved in the service of Satan; but he received, he comforted, he defended her, at the hazard of his own reputation.

He replied, in a very apposite parable, to the secret objections of the Pharisees (for they had not been openly avowed), showing, that of two debtors, both of whom are insolvent, and both freely released from their obligations by their generous creditor, he to whom the largest forgiveness is extended will feel the warmest gratitude. He then referred immediately to the case of Simon and the woman, reproving him for the neglect of those tokens of respect which are usually paid to welcome visitants, and commending her for the expressions of her regard, however extravagant they might seem. The Pharisee thought his own offences few and trivial, and, therefore, could not entertain any high value for the Saviour; but she, who was overwhelmed with a deep sense of her aggravated guilt, and yet cheered with the hope of a full and gratuitous pardon, was solicitous to declare, in every way she could, the ardour of her affection towards Him, who had obtained the mercy for her. "Wherefore," said Jesus, "her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much." Her strong attachment to Christ did not procure her remission, but, rather, it was its fruit and evidence. It would invert the order of things, and of God's dispensations to his people, to suppose that this attachment preceded her acceptance; but it afforded a striking proof of it, and

manifestly arose from a conviction of her vast obligations. Not, therefore, as if she were then first received to favour, but to establish her the more in thankfulness, hope, and joy, he solemnly pronounced her absolution: "Thy sins are forgiven." That very circumstance occasioned fresh offence among those who were present; for they had no just conceptions of the person and authority of Jesus. But, in order to declare his divine character most peremptorily, and to assert his high prerogative, however they might cavil, he repeated the assurance of her pardon and salvation, through faith in his name, and dismissed her in peace.

A serious attention to this little narrative may suggest the following inquiries, which will furnish an useful improvement of the subject.

Are not we debtors to God, according to the description of the parable? Have we not failed of that obedience which He has a right to demand? Is not our debt large, immense beyond calculation? Let us beware of the ignorance and presumption of the Pharisee. Though others may seem to owe far more, will this procure our discharge? Or are there any, among the most atrocious offenders, whom we may disdain? Does it not, rather, become us to confess that our own transgressions are innumerable, and, considering how we have violated the strongest obligations to God, that none can need forgiveness more?

Are not we, likewise, insolvent? Or, in what manner shall we contrive to answer all the claims which the Lord God has upon us? What payment can we tender? Is it such as will be sufficient to satisfy his just

demands? It is said, perhaps, "We shall repent, and do better." But shall we ever perform more than would have been due from us if we had not sinned? And, if we only prevent an increase of the debt in future, can this have any effect in diminishing what is already contracted, or wipe off any part of the old account against us? What, then, shall we resolve on? Let us not waste the time in forming vain and fruitless schemes of our own, but frankly acknowledge our inability, and go with deepest humiliation to that Jesus, who "receiveth sinners." Let each of us cry to Him, "O Lord, undertake for me:" He will appear as our Surety, and present us with a full and free discharge. If, like this penitent woman, we mourn and weep at his feet, he will observe our tears, commiserate our distress, and hasten to comfort us with the assurance that "our sins, which are many, are forgiven."

If, then, he pronounce us to be acquitted, what should hinder but that we depart in peace? This is his own gracious proposal, and ought not to be refused. Yet do not many reject the consolation, and indulge an excess of sorrow? Doubtless there is continual cause to abhor ourselves, and lament our folly; but to grieve as if there were no hope is to despise the mercy provided. Jesus, the compassionate Redeemer, stands ready to wipe away our tears, and bids us "Be of good cheer." Let us only, without reserve, submit to him, and depend upon him; and then we may "go on our way rejoicing."

Finally, what affections do we feel towards Jesus? Surely the warmest expressions of thankfulness and zeal

are highly suitable and becoming in those who have obtained such free and extensive forgiveness. Where Jesus is disregarded, we can assign the real cause ; the malignity of sin is not understood, the greatness of the debt incurred is not at all apprehended, and it is supposed that there is but little, if any, need of remission. Do we, therefore, show any certain signs of sincere and ardent love to our heavenly Benefactor? Do we seek his presence, and delight to be in the house where Jesus is? Do we mourn before him ; and are we willing to be at expense for his sake? We cannot, indeed, make any adequate compensation ; but do not we wish to testify the sense which we feel of our immense obligations to him?—" O Lord, come, and shed abroad thy love in our hearts by the Holy Ghost, that we may hereby be constrained to dedicate ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and lively sacrifice unto Thee, who hast loved us, and given thyself for us !" Amen.

J E S U S C H R I S T.

SECT. XVI.

Jesus took another circuit—healed a demoniac—vindicated that miracle against the objections of the Pharisees—admonished and reprov'd them—and encouraged his faithful adherents.

THE grand Luminary, which visited the earth in the person of Jesus Christ, diffused its unequalled splendour through a large extent. Happy indeed would have been the men of that generation, if they had been sensible of their inestimable privilege, in having such an Inhabitant, such a Teacher, amongst them. He brought with him “good tidings of great joy to all people,” and he laboured to disseminate the knowledge of them far and wide. He took one circuit after another, in the land of Judea, publishing salvation wherever he went, and among all ranks and characters. Not seeking the friendship of the great, or any sensual enjoyments, but ever intent upon his work, he removed from city to city, with considerable pain and fatigue to himself, for the benefit of others, that he might give them an opportunity of being instructed in the Gospel of his grace.*

* Luke viii. 1—3.

Where are they who copy after this illustrious pattern? Though we are not called to travel in the same manner, we ought to possess the same spirit, and be willing to sacrifice our ease to usefulness. "Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others." So shall "this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus."* A similar benevolence may be displayed even by persons of moderate abilities and private situations. According to our talents and occasions, we should lay ourselves out for the glory of God and the best interests of our fellow-creatures. Hereby we shall evince our acquaintance and union with him, whose name we bear, while "we are changed into the same image, from glory to glory, by the Spirit of the Lord."

Many, who resorted to him, soon withdrew from his company, having no relish for his conversation. But he had some stated attendants, throughout his various movements, who were almost inseparably attached to him. "The twelve were with him." These he selected as his chosen witnesses, that they might be instructed in the mysteries of his kingdom, confirmed in their regard, and fitted for their apostolic function. Certain pious women, also, who had been healed of their infirmities, and converted by his grace, occasionally, at least, waited on him, and "ministered unto him of their substance." What condescension, to receive such assistance! He became very poor indeed. Though "the earth is his, and the fulness thereof," so mean and destitute was his condition here, that he subsisted

* Phil. ii. 4, 5.

upon the charity of others. Shall we admire their liberality, in contributing to his support? Or rather shall we not envy them the honour of being permitted to do so? "It is more blessed to give than to receive."* And may not this blessedness be ours? Though we cannot minister unto Jesus, in his person, we may in his representatives, in his distressed members; for, what is bestowed upon them he will consider as bestowed upon himself. And, if we "shut up our bowels of compassion from them, how dwelleth the love of God in us?"†

Thus attended, then, Jesus took another circuit, in which we shall meet with some remarkable occurrences. In the course of his progress, a poor unhappy man, under the possession of the devil, so grievously afflicted as to be deprived both of his sight and speech, was brought to him, and obtained immediate relief.‡ According to his custom, he paid a gracious regard to the application, by expelling the evil spirit, and restoring the demoniac to the perfect exercise of his faculties. And what effect did the miracle produce? The common people were struck with astonishment, and ready to draw the conclusion that Jesus must be the promised Messiah. But were not these persons ignorant, and liable to be imposed on? That they were unlettered, it is allowed; yet that circumstance was no disadvantage to them in the present case: they were as capable of judging of plain facts as the acutest philosophers. The Scribes and Pharisees, conceited of their wisdom, like

* Acts xx. 35.

† 1 John iii 17.

‡ Matt. xii. 22--32. Mark iii. 22--30. Luke xi. 14--23.

most pretenders to science, possessed more pride, and therefore more prejudice, than the multitude; and thus, whatever evidence the Saviour exhibited, they constantly urged one objection or another, and would not be convinced. How malignant and impious a disposition did they discover in the instance before us! They suspected, if they did not avow their sentiments, that Jesus performed the miracle by the assistance of Satan, and really acted in confederacy with the prince of darkness, to promote his interest in the world. How infamous and absurd the inference! Was there any ground, in his life, his doctrines, or his works, to accuse him as an agent or accomplice of the devil? No: very far otherwise indeed. But it is not uncommon for men who hate the Gospel to give a credit and importance to such insinuations against it, as appear, upon the very face of them, ridiculous and false.

This circumstance, however, rendered the character of Jesus the more illustrious; for it produced fresh proofs of his meekness and wisdom. His followers, also, should remember, that, while they preserve a proper temper under malicious calumnies and reproaches, they afford such an evidence of their sincerity, and the excellency of their principles, as must eventually turn to the confusion of their enemies. Our Lord spoke in his own vindication; but his defence went rather to convince, or at least to silence, his adversaries, than to justify himself. "It is a very small thing, that we should be judged of man's judgment;" and therefore, if we be ever so much traduced (and it is not possible that we can be more so than the Saviour), let us not

be solicitous, on our own account merely, to obviate the charges which envy or malevolence may bring against us. Yet there may be reasons which render it expedient to reply.

Jesus showed that he was privy to their thoughts, for he spoke to their secret surmises, while he proved their objections to be most foolish and profane. He argued that Satan would never oppose his own interest, or dispossess himself; for such a conduct would infallibly weaken, and even destroy, his kingdom amongst men: and on the same ground we maintain that the Gospel, which contains a system of religion, manifestly subversive of the devil's influence in the world, must be from Heaven. He alleged, that as they believed some of their own disciples to cast out demons by the Spirit of God, they ought not to ascribe his miracles to any other cause. On their own principles he convicted them of the most partial and unjust judgment, in not allowing those dispossessions, which he had effected, to proceed from the Holy Ghost, as well as those which were accompanied by the exorcisms of their own adherents. He then contended, that, granting a divine agency in what he had performed, they must also admit that he was come to set up the kingdom of God among them; and, therefore, instead of foolishly and maliciously cavilling at him, they ought with profound humility to solicit a place in that kingdom. The fact was, that Satan, who had long maintained an undisturbed dominion, was now in various instances deprived of his influence. His authority was so far destroyed; many of those, whom he had held in cruel bondage,

being rescued out of his hands by the superior and irresistible power of Jesus. The inference then was clear and decisive, that he, who "destroyed the works of the devil," could not be his confederate.

Our Lord proceeded to warn them that it was impossible for them to observe a neutrality in the contest which he had instituted against the prince of darkness, and that all were required to declare themselves either on one side or the other. The same warfare is still carried on, and it holds good to this present day, "He that is not with him is against him; and he that gathereth not with him scattereth abroad." He commands us, in the most explicit manner, to espouse his cause with cordiality, and support it with vigour. On which side then do we stand? Here are two Leaders, of opposite interests, never to be reconciled: and it is indispensably requisite that every man show himself, decidedly and actively, for the one and against the other. Have we entered into the service of Jesus? Are we "with him;" sincerely without dissimulation; uniformly, without wavering; and universally, without reserve? This he demands. Yet how many are satisfied, merely because they do not set themselves in an avowed resistance against Christ and his measures! You, who do not oppose the Gospel or its professors, may boast of your candour and liberality; and, as you are not open enemies, may presume upon being accounted his friends. But you are most unhappily deluded. Your indifference about his cause he considers as a marked contempt of him; and therefore he thanks you not for abstaining from hostilities; but, while you

refuse to exert yourselves for him, he looks upon you as being in the interest of his grand opponent.

Jesus, perceiving in these proud and malevolent cavillers a confirmed hatred of him, warned them still further of their danger in daring to ascribe to Satan's agency what had been effected only by the divine Spirit. He declared, that, while the Gospel offers a full and free forgiveness of "all manner of sin and blasphemy," one offence is excepted, and that "the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men."

This is a most tremendous assertion indeed! It should excite a holy fear and circumspection in us all. We ought to beware that we do not even approach to the sin; much less should we imitate the profane effrontery of those who deny or ridicule the operations of the Holy Ghost. It is far better to keep at a distance, than to understand exactly its particular nature and precise limits. But it may be proper to inquire of what kind the offence is, of which such awful things are spoken. Many painful apprehensions are entertained by persons of a tender conscience, as if they had certainly committed it, and therefore, by the divine decree, were absolutely and for ever excluded from mercy. But so far, perhaps, we may confidently affirm, that those, who are most oppressed with the dread, are least in danger of having contracted the enormous guilt.

From a comparison of the different passages in the sacred Scriptures, where the sin is mentioned,* it appears to be an entire rejection of the Gospel. And,

* Heb. vi. 4--6. x. 26--29. 1 John v. 16.

since there is no other remedy for our fallen state, who shall dare to complain, whatever be their punishment, after their own deliberate refusal of salvation? Yet this is not all: it is an avowed and continued opposition to the grace of Christ. The Pharisees, to whom our Lord spoke, persecuted and calumniated him, as acting under the direction of Satan. Shall we say, then, that decided enmity against him is, of itself, unpardonable? Many, who have made long and furious resistance to him, have found mercy. St. Paul himself had once been "a blasphemer and a persecutor;" and it is probable that some, who had "crucified the Lord of glory," were redeemed to God by the very blood which they shed. But they sinned ignorantly. The offence here specified is committed against strong evidence and conviction of the truth. One miracle upon another had been wrought in the sight of those very people who still persisted in reviling our Lord; and probably they acted in repugnance to the full persuasion of their own mind. Yet it is supposed by some that Jesus referred, not to the case of those presumptuous opposers, but of such as should witness the extraordinary effusion of the Holy Ghost upon the Apostles, and should then ascribe his operations to the influence of Satan, rejecting the Gospel as a base and impious fraud. Certain it is that the persons liable to this condemnation are those who have received the clearest information, the most decisive testimony, and deepest impressions of religion upon their hearts; and yet, in defiance of all, put away from them the salvation of God, with a blas-

phemous contempt. Such is the description given of the unpardonable apostate. It should still be remarked, that "backsliding," though attended with circumstances of peculiar aggravation, may obtain forgiveness with God; and that then only we may fear it is the black offence to which remission is denied, when it involves in it a malicious and confirmed opposition to the truth. For it should carefully be noted that it is never followed by contrition or godly sorrow, but always accompanied with an unrelenting obduracy of mind. The apostate, whose case is desperate, cannot be "renewed unto repentance." Those, therefore, who feel a tenderness of conscience and a real compunction of heart for the guilt they have contracted, and who seek deliverance by the blood of Jesus, afford the strongest evidence that the sin here spoken of is not chargeable to their account, however they may be oppressed by the painful apprehension. After all, any other wilful transgression against God, if persevered in, will be fatal and damnable to the soul; and yet, in every instance, forgiveness is in this life promised and granted to the humble and believing penitent.

But why, it may be asked, was this severe admonition addressed to the Pharisees? Had they cast off all regard to religion? No: but their professions were hypocritical, as their words and actions clearly proved. Jesus, therefore, exhorted them to a consistency of conduct, either in one way or another, by giving up themselves to God sincerely and without reserve, or else by throwing off their pretences to piety, and appearing

openly and avowedly wicked, that so the fruit might accord with the nature of the tree.* They had uttered blasphemous expressions, from which he proceeded to convict them of their guilt and danger. He affirmed that they had spoken agreeably to their inward dispositions, and that the source of all foolish and profane conversation lies in a depraved and unconverted heart. Lest this should be made light of, as if words alone, being no more than a mere breath of air, were of little consequence, he warned them that God would soon call them to judgment, not only for their daring and impious assertions, but for all their vain and idle talk, and that their common discourse would be adduced as an evidence of the state of their minds, either to their acquittal or condemnation.

And do these things concern none but the ancient Pharisees? Shall not we also be tried for the words of our lips, and our eternal doom be assigned according to the attestation which they shall deliver? Yet who considers the tendency of his conversation, or endeavours so to order it that he may not be ashamed to "give account thereof in the day of judgment?" If "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh," how shall we stand the test; or what will our prevailing tempers and passions appear to have been? Do not the mouths of many among us utter blasphemy; and others delight in expressions of lewdness, slander, and reviling? Where are those who conform to the apostolic rule? "Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good, to the

* Matt. xii. 33, &c. Mark iii. 31, &c. Luke xi. 24—36.

use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers."* Is the discourse of the most eminent believers as spiritual and heavenly as might be expected from their high character? O let us pray, "Set a watch, O Lord, before my mouth; keep the door of my lips; and let my words be acceptable in thy sight."†

Did the solemn warning, then, convince or silence the Pharisees? No: they perceived that he claimed a dignity which they were unwilling to acknowledge; and therefore they complained of the want of evidence, and demanded some further sign, desiring, perhaps, a visible display of his divine glory, or an appearance from heaven, which should carry absolute demonstration with it. How preposterous was this! Shall proud and obdurate sinners prescribe to God by what particular kind or degree of testimony he shall confirm his own revelations to them? Jesus, therefore, declared that no other sort of attestation should be granted till his own resurrection, which, he foretold, would happen on the third day from his death, agreeably to its typical resemblance in Jonah's miraculous deliverance. He reproved them for their obstinate impenitence and unbelief; he threatened them with the most aggravated punishment. The Ninevites had repented at the preaching of Jonah, but they had despised a greater Prophet. He referred them, also, to the queen of Sheba, who had travelled from a remote country, with much pains and expense, that she might profit by the wisdom of Solomon, while they had shown the utmost

* Eph. iv. 29.

† Psal. xix. 14, cxli. 3.

contempt and hatred of him, who was far superior to Solomon; and he warned them that her example would condemn their perverseness.

Are we satisfied with the proofs brought in favour of the Gospel? Nothing, indeed, but a proud or sensual disposition, will lead us to deny their sufficiency. Many in our own day, like the unbelievers of old, call for additional and stronger evidence, and presumptuously refuse to examine that which is already proposed to them. But the Lord God is not at their command: nor will he model his dispensations according to their wishes. O beware, lest, in righteous judgment for your arrogance, he leave you to yourselves! "Light is come into the world;" and if your eyes have not discerned its excellency, the reason is, you have "loved darkness rather than light:" and your final condemnation will be much more aggravated when you are compared with others who have made good improvement of inferior advantages.

Better things might have been expected from many of our Lord's captious hearers, who had once discovered a hopeful disposition. The kingdom of Satan seemed to be shaken amongst them; but they fell back again to their former condition of a willing subjection to his government, and gave him a more entire ascendancy over their minds; and therefore Jesus foretold that their "last state would be worse than the first." On this occasion he delivered the parable of the relapsing demoniac. The evil spirit may depart for a time, as if he had quitted his hold of the poor enslaved sinner, and yet may return to his possession. The door being

open, the heart prepared to comply with his suggestions, and no contrary principle forbidding his admission, he will enter with greater strength, and lead the captive soul with increasing obduracy from one degree of wickedness to another.

This describes a common case. Many are deeply affected by the faithful and lively preaching of the Gospel; and a temporary reformation takes place. Their attention may be roused, their passions moved, and especially their fears alarmed by the striking addresses of some plain practical preacher; and then they cannot continue in the same vain and sinful habits as before. Like Herod, who "heard John the Baptist gladly, and did many things," they may express a warm approbation of the minister, and amend their conduct, at least in certain enormities; so that it may seem as if the evil spirit was expelled. But they rest in a mere external change, and fail of a real conversion of the heart; and therefore Satan, who has withdrawn his influence for a time, obtains a free admission again. The habitation is made ready for his reception; and he returns with seven-fold force. How terrible the consequence! A relapse is often more to be dreaded than the first attack of a disorder. "Evil men and seducers wax worse and worse:"* "the latter end is worse with them than the beginning."† Let us, therefore implore the God of all grace, so to drive out the prince of darkness, that He himself may take full and everlasting possession of our souls, and nothing be "able to separate

* 2 Tim. iii. 13.

† 2 Pet. ii. 20.

us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

In this awful manner Jesus continued to preach the word with unshaken fortitude and unwearied patience, exposing himself to the malevolence of his enemies by his pointed reproofs, and exhausting his bodily strength by incessant labours. While he was thus employed, a certain woman, impressed by his exhortations, exclaimed, as if in envious admiration of the happiness of her who was favoured with such a Son: but he replied, that a far greater privilege is conferred on those who believe and obey the Gospel. His pious mother, together with some near relations, stood at a distance, and, probably, through anxiety for his welfare, wished to call him away. It seems they were prevented from approaching by the surrounding multitudes. It was, therefore, intimated to him, that they were waiting to speak with him. But he, still intent upon his important work, and to encourage the attendance of his faithful followers, declared that those who truly received and practised his word were much dearer to him than the nearest among his earthly connexions, merely as such, could possibly be. He meant not to slight his mother or any of his kindred, but to show that we should be superior to all carnal and worldly regards, by looking beyond the ties of consanguinity; and, in order to animate his disciples to diligence and perseverance in his service, he took that opportunity of expressing his warmest affection for them.

Are any persons ready to congratulate the blessed Vir-

gin, who had the distinguished honour of bringing forth the Saviour of mankind? The way is here pointed out, in which you may obtain a superior dignity. Only yield an unfeigned respect to the Gospel, give up your whole hearts to God, and walk in cheerful obedience to his commands, and you shall be happier, and dearer to Jesus, than any natural relation to him could make you. If you profess a peculiar attachment, and number yourselves among his followers, we ask, whether you are willing to walk in holiness as he requires. Or, are you satisfied with paying him an unmeaning compliment, as if it could please him to cry "Lord, Lord," while you regard not his precepts? Observe, that he pronounces his benediction upon those who not only HEAR, but DO, his word, and perform the "will of his Father." Are you such? Or, are you not conscious that some or other of your tempers and practices expressly contradict his injunctions? You must search out, and put away from you "the accursed thing," which he hateth; or else it were presumption to expect his favourable notice.

You, who have devoted yourselves to him "without partiality and without hypocrisy," may take fresh courage, since you are assured from his own mouth how dear you are to him. You are in his account as "a brother, a sister, and a mother." Do you know what those tender names imply? Yet you cannot conceive the strength of his affection for you. How ample is the recompense he bestows for all you can do or suffer in his cause! O, let a sense of his unmerited and extensive love excite you to more vigorous and cheerful

exertions, that you may express your gratitude, and promote his glory!

But let "the sinners in Zion be afraid, and fearfulness surprise the hypocrites." The eye of Jesus discerns your insincerity under every specious disguise which you may assume. And in what light do you appear before him? Does he regard you as "a brother, a sister, and a mother?" No: he detests the baseness of your character; and he will avenge the insults you put upon him. O, cast off the mask of an unsound profession; confess your iniquity; sue to him for pardon, while he waits to be gracious; and implore the influence of his Spirit, "to the end he may establish your hearts unblameable in holiness!"

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. XVII.

Jesus repaired to the sea-shore, and instructed the multitude by the parables of the sower—the tares—the growth of corn—the grain of mustard-seed—the leaven in meal—the treasure hid in a field—the pearl of great price—and the net gathering different kinds of fishes.

THE life, at least the public life, of Jesus, was very short; but, being employed in almost constant exertions for the glory of God and the benefit of men, it was crowded with important events. If we possessed a larger measure of his activity and zeal, much might be done in the contracted period of our existence upon earth; for our usefulness depends not on length of days, but on their diligent improvement.

The friends of Jesus were, perhaps, apprehensive that he would impair his strength by incessant labours; and therefore they endeavoured to draw him away from the multitude, that he might have some intermission. Probably, he yielded to their importunity, and retired; but “the same day” he appeared again in public, concerned for the people, who came from all parts to hear his heavenly doctrines. It cannot be wrong to pay a prudent regard to our health; for reli-

gion requires not any efforts, to which our bodily frame is unequal. But, from an attention to ourselves, let us not plead for indolence, or neglect those opportunities of doing good, which are, evidently, within our power. May it please God to "shed abroad his love in our hearts by the Holy Ghost," that his work may ever be our delight! Then shall we lament that our usefulness is so confined, and that our best exertions bear no proportion to the extent of our desires.

No sooner did Jesus quit the house to which he had withdrawn, than immense numbers surrounded him, as before.* Being situated near the sea, for the better convenience of delivering his instructions, he entered into a ship, from which he addressed the people, who stood upon the shore in a serious and respectful manner to hear him. He spake to them by parables, that is, by certain likenesses or representations, taken from the ordinary occurrences of life, in which, while a common history seems to be related, some spiritual information is meant to be conveyed. This method of teaching was frequent among the ancients; and it is happily calculated to strike the mind, and leave a lasting impression upon the memory. He proposed, to the consideration of the audience then assembled before him, various similitudes of this kind, all of them tending to show the nature of his kingdom upon earth, the character of its true members, its gradual augmentation, and invaluable blessings.

The parable of the sower stands first in order. Here

* Mat. xiii. 1—23. Mark iv. 1—25. Luke viii. 4—18.

an attentive and diligent husbandman is exhibited in the cultivation of an extensive field. Desirous of procuring a large increase, he took care that good seed should be sown upon every part of it ; but, as it consisted of different sorts of soil, the effect was very different. In one place, where the ground was hard as a beaten path ; the seed could not enter, and, as it lay exposed, was either destroyed by the feet of passengers, or devoured by the birds. Another place afforded a promising appearance for a short time : the ground was rocky, being covered only with a thin coat of earth ; and this for a while gave nourishment to the grain which was cast upon it ; but, having no depth, it could not defend the root from the scorching sun ; and therefore the whole of the produce soon withered away. A third situation proved unfavourable to the good seed ; for the thorns, which grew there, checked the efforts of the rising corn, and effectually prevented it from coming to maturity. Was, therefore, all the labour vain ? No : there was one portion of the field which answered the expectations of the owner : it brought forth a plentiful increase, though in various degrees, which gradually ripened till the time of harvest, and was then gathered into the barn.

At the conclusion of this little narration, Jesus required his audience to fix their attention upon it, as involving truths of the greatest importance. He proclaimed aloud, " He that hath ears to hear, let him hear ;" which intimated that some would understand and regard the instruction, whilst it would be totally lost upon others.

But wherefore did he use such a studied obscurity in his preaching? His very disciples seemed unable to account for it, and therefore afterwards put the question in private, "Why speakest thou unto them in parables?" and besought him to explain his design. This gave him occasion to vindicate that peculiar manner of teaching. A parable will readily be comprehended by those who are seriously disposed, and desirous of useful information; but to others it may appear to have no meaning, or none of any consequence. This, he observed, was intended in just judgment against those who had despised his plainest declarations. He replied to his disciples to the following effect: "The mysteries of the kingdom, which remain a secret to them; are in rich mercy revealed unto you, my beloved friends. And this method is agreeable to the righteous proceedings of God, who in general dispenses his favours to men according to their temper and improvement. Those, therefore, who have refused to be convinced on the strongest evidence, and have contemptuously rejected all the offers of my grace, shall be given up to a judicial blindness and obduracy; so that, how long soever they may be spared under means and ordinances, they never will be brought to a true and spiritual understanding of the Gospel. How great, then, is your blessedness, who have obtained a divine illumination, whereby you perceive the doctrines which I deliver, and feel their powerful influence upon your minds! You are distinguished above the most eminent saints of old, who saw but through a glass darkly, and

looked forwards with ardent desires to the advantages and privileges which you now enjoy."

Such was the purport of our Lord's interesting address to his disciples ; and a solemn warning it conveys to us. We must render an account to God for the religious opportunities with which we are favoured. He hath sent to us the Gospel of his Son, and He will shortly inquire what reception we have given it. Are there not many among us who will not even examine it with seriousness, but, like the Pharisees, disdainfully put away the truth from them ? No wonder, then, that to you, who are of this character, the doctrines of Jesus appear obscure or inconsistent. O, be afraid, lest, while you shut your eyes and stop your ears, God determine in his wrath that they never shall be opened ! The day of grace may be expired with respect to some, even while they are suffered to remain upon earth. O, listen to those, who beseech you "that ye receive not the grace of God in vain!"—"Behold, now is the accepted time ; behold, now is the day of salvation !"*

This very caution is inculcated in the parable before us. That we may enter more fully into the subject, let us advert to our Lord's explanation. Jesus is "the Sower," who by himself and his ministers scatters abroad the good seed of his word. But, alas ! the most excellent instruction does not always produce the desired effects : through various causes men are prevented from receiving that real advantage which it is calcu-

* 2 Cor. vi. 1, 2,

lated to promote. These causes exist in the men themselves.

Some are hard and impenetrable as the ground on which they tread ; fitly compared, therefore, to “ the way-side.” They give no serious attention to the momentous truths which they hear, nor take any pains to understand them. Upon these, then, no good impression is made : the word preached to them is soon forgotten and lost ; they do not even resist the attempts of Satan, who is hovering around, like a bird of prey, and who, to frustrate the design of the Gospel, will artfully contrive to divert their minds from it, by proposing subjects more pleasing to their carnal nature.

But others are affected with the declarations of the Gospel. So far the seed is admitted, as their passions are moved by the things which are spoken to them. They listen with avidity, form the best resolutions, and discover an ardent zeal for religion. But, alas ! like the rocky ground, they have no depth ; and therefore their convictions are hasty and superficial, not being able to penetrate their hearts. Their professions may be warm, and excite notice and admiration, but the trying season is at hand, in which all their fine appearances will wither away. Troubles, like the scorching sun, will prove that their principles have not taken firm root within, as these have not influence enough to support them.

A third sort may also promise fair, and preserve a show of piety for a length of time. The blade springs up, and endures the various changes of the weather. Yet it does not thrive ; for thorns surround and choke

it. Ah ! how many constantly attend upon the ministry of the Gospel, in whom no saving effect is produced ! The cares, riches, and pleasures of life, so engross their minds, that no proper heed can be given to the truth which is heard ; and, of consequence, it is lost upon them ; for, with a heart so much attached to secular concerns, they cannot possess any spiritual life or vigour. They may maintain their place in the visible church ; but, when we look for the fruits of righteousness, we are disappointed, and their religion is vain.

The labour, however, of the husbandman, is not in every instance unprofitable. There are those who resemble the good ground, who are prepared by divine grace for a due reception of the heavenly word. Their supreme regard is fixed upon it ; they perceive its important meaning, and cherish it in their hearts, till its grand design is answered. “ They walk worthy of the Lord, unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God.”* A difference, indeed, in their excellence and usefulness, is observable ; but all bring forth fruit to maturity, and some in an eminent degree. Their sincerity is proved by their perseverance in holiness. They endure every trial ; they stand both the winter’s cold and the summer’s heat, and “ go on unto perfection.”

Can we avoid making the application ? If we are favoured with the preaching of “ the everlasting Gospel,” and constantly attend upon it, let us inquire, What is the effect produced ? Do we seriously meditate on what we hear ? Is any deep and lasting impression fixed upon

* Col. i. 10.

our minds? Are any spiritual principles implanted, and habits formed? Is our religion such as will carry us through temptations and persecutions? Is it such as renders us superior to the sollicitations of the flesh, and the allurements of the world? Do none of these things take up that time and thought which should be devoted to the care of the soul? And are we not, consequently, in a lean and barren state, notwithstanding the faithful administration of the sacred ordinances around us? If those only receive real advantage from the Gospel, who are so affected by it as to bring forth the substantial fruits of holiness, do we come under that description? Or what is the profit which has accrued from our profession?

The Saviour subjoined a most solemn caution, reminding his disciples that divine light was communicated to them for the benefit of others, and that they should make a good improvement of the instructions delivered, by recommending the same important truths to the world around them. And ought not we, also, to consider for what intent our religious privileges are bestowed upon us? Do we shine, in our respective places, as "lights of the world," desirous to impart knowledge to them who are in darkness? It should be remembered, that, if our distinguished favours are not turned to some useful account, we may not only be soon deprived of them, but shall be severely condemned for the neglect.

On the same occasion, it should seem, our Lord delivered the parable of the tares.* Here again a com-

* Matt. xiii. 24--30, 36--43.

mon story is related, for the purpose of communicating spiritual information. A field was sown with good seed, which, from its favourable growth, promised a plentiful increase. But, through the malicious interference of one who was an enemy to the owner of the land, and through the negligence of the servants, to whom it was committed, tares were scattered among the wheat. The injury was not discovered till the fruit of the corn appeared; and then it was proposed to root up the noxious weeds, which obstructed the ripening of the crop. The master, however, rejected that scheme, as being attended with some danger, and allowed the tares to remain, commanding only that in the time of harvest they should be carefully separated, and consumed by fire, while the good grain should be collected and secured in the storehouse.

What instruction, then, does this narrative convey? The disciples did not first perceive it, and therefore afterwards, when Jesus retired, they requested him to explain it. In condescension to their inquiries, he gave a clear and minute interpretation; from which we learn that the parable exhibits the present state of his kingdom, or the visible church, as it consists of a mixed company, hypocritical pretenders as well as real believers. These may not always be distinguishable from each other, and for wise purposes may be suffered to continue in the same religious community. The latter only are "the children of the kingdom," entitled to its blessings; and they possess their high privileges merely by the grace of Jesus; for He it is who sows the good seed in his field. The former are "the chil-

dren of the wicked one," being induced by his influence to put on the semblance of piety ; whilst they still bear his likeness, cheerfully comply with his temptations, and do his work. In the rashness of our zeal, we might sometimes wish a greater separation to be made than the present system of things will admit ; we might wish that the saints of God were no longer "vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked." But we must wait for that event till the end of the world, the great harvest ; and then, how accurate will be the distinction of characters, how wide the difference between them ! The reapers, who are the angels of God, cannot err in the awful division which they shall make, or appoint any individual to an improper place. Every tare shall be burned with fire : every grain of wheat shall be safely lodged in the heavenly garner. How tremendous the destruction of the ungodly in that "furnace of fire," where shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth ! How excellent the glory into which the righteous shall enter, where they "shall shine forth as the sun, in the kingdom of their Father !"

May God excite in us "great searchings of heart !" What is our present character ? What our future prospect ? We are fixed in the outward church of Christ ; but we are not therefore secure of an admission into his blissful presence above. Possibly we may wear the garb of sanctity ; and others may not suspect any insincerity in us. But unless we are renewed in righteousness, and "have our fruit unto holiness," our hope is presumptuous, and our "expectations shall perish." Nor let the impenitent flatter themselves that

they shall escape detection in the midst of so immense a multitude. Sinners, be assured that the eye of God perfectly discerns you now, and that his hand will find you out hereafter. Whatever fair appearances you may assume, or whatever plausible excuses you may frame, His righteous judgment shall be executed: "These shall go away into everlasting punishment; but the righteous into life eternal."*

Our Lord also delivered, probably to the same audience, various other similitudes, all of them instructive and important.†

He referred them to the gradual increase of corn, by the inexplicable principle of vegetation, as a representation of the progress of his spiritual kingdom. The seed is cast into the ground, and, without any further care of the husbandman, it rises insensibly, and advances by degrees to a state of maturity, when, being fully ripe, it is cut down, and gathered into the barn.

The interpretation is obvious. The work of God, both in the church as a community, and in the heart of each individual believer, is carried on imperceptibly, like the growth of corn, in a way which depends not on human management, and which we cannot explain. The seed may appear to perish in the earth, or the blade to spring up in a very slow manner, while the mysterious process goes forward without interruption. Let us not despond, though we see not the most favourable appearances at once; nor let us be impatient, though we perceive not, after a length of time, the per-

* Matt. xxv. 46.

† Matt. xiii. 31—35, 44—53. Mark iv. 26—34.

fection of grace either in ourselves or others. Let us pray that the Gospel may spread its influence from one kingdom to another, and that we ourselves may "go from strength to strength." We wait for the harvest: may we all be ripening for it; that, when the great Reaper "putteth in the sickle" (as he will at the hour of death, with respect to every separate person), we may be received into his celestial garner!

The same instruction is conveyed in the parable of the grain of mustard-seed. This, though one of the least of seeds, it is observed, produced in eastern countries a tree so large, that the birds, might build their nests in its branches. The astonishing increase exhibits the mighty power of God in his providence; and equally illustrious is the display of his grace in causing his Gospel to spread and flourish, from the smallest and most contemptible appearances, till it shall fill the earth, and afford a refuge in the church for men of all ranks and characters, and for all the nations of the world. The progress in our day may seem inconsiderable; but we look forwards, with cheerful hopes, to those glorious times, when the branches of this tree shall be so enlarged as to reach the most distant lands: for "the kingdoms of this world shall become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ."* The case is similar with respect to the establishment of divine grace in the heart of every Christian. This holy principle may seem, in its beginning, to possess little influence, and promise no great improvement. But the plant is under the peculiar care of Heaven,

* Rev. xi. 15.

and, being watered from above, it shall thrive and prosper. It shall gradually extend its shoots, till it occupy every part of the soul, in which it has been fixed.

Our Lord confirmed and illustrated this truth by the parable of the leaven, which he described as put into a large quantity of meal. This, being inconsiderable in its bulk, may lie concealed for a time, as if it had no effect: but its operation, though secret, is powerful; and, as its fermentation spreads by degrees, it will diffuse itself through the whole mass. Just so the Gospel, which was of little account in the world at first, is in a progressive state, and, we trust, will increase more and more, till it reduce all nations to "the obedience of faith." "A little one shall become a thousand, and a small one a strong nation. The Lord will hasten it in his time."* Nor is the case at all different, wherever the sacred influence of God's Spirit is put into the heart. For a season it may not excite notice; much weakness may seem to attend its first efforts, so that the change produced may not show itself in every part, or in any remarkable manner. But the operation, which is accompanied with a mighty energy, will be effectual in the end. It will be felt in every faculty and member, and gain a complete ascendancy over the whole man. Such is the usual advancement of religion in the soul.

Is this what we are acquainted with, in our own particular state? We would encourage any favourable appearances, any feeble attempts to serve God "in spi-

* Isa. lx. 22.

rit and in truth." "For who hath despised the day of small things?"* Yet we are taught to expect a gradual progress; and therefore we inquire, Are we growing in grace? Do we increase in spiritual light and vigour, and become more and more confirmed in holy principles and habits? Doubtless we should feel an ardent desire that the Gospel may extend its influence from house to house, and from town to town, in every nation, till it reach the remotest corners of the earth. But let us not forget OURSELVES, nor cease to lift up our prayer, that, professing the truth of God, we may feel more of the efficacy of our own principles, and be gradually transformed into the divine likeness, "from glory to glory." May the sanctifying energy of our religion diffuse itself throughout all our faculties, and bring our affections, words, and actions, into subjection under the government of Christ!

Thus Jesus continued to describe the nature of his kingdom by figurative illustrations. This method of teaching, indeed, has something of obscurity in it; and that obscurity was intended: for many of his audience could not bear a more clear and avowed declaration, so that he might have hazarded his life by speaking more explicitly. Besides, in this very way of delivering his instructions by parables, he accommodated himself to an ancient Scripture, which is therefore said to be fulfilled in him.

Other similitudes were added, which were calculated to give direction and encouragement to his disciples. The Gospel may fitly be compared to an im-

* Zech. iv. 10.

mense treasure; it is an inexhaustible mine of spiritual riches. This may be represented as "hid in a field:" the valuable substance, not being exposed on the surface, may escape the notice of careless observers, and cannot be explored without much pains. Men of carnal dispositions are not aware how many and precious blessings are comprised in that salvation which they neglect and despise. But those who perceive its transcendent worth will "rejoice as one that findeth great spoil,"* and gladly relinquish every other possession, if necessary, that they may secure it for their own. Who, then, among us, are desirous to purchase this field, which contains such inexpressible wealth? Alas! do you not betray your ignorance of "the kingdom of heaven," who estimate the Gospel at a low rate? It would not pass with you for a trifle, as it now does, if you were acquainted with its hidden treasure. You would not scruple to part with any thing for Christ's sake, if you properly understood the value of his grace. You pour contempt upon him if you do not prefer him to the best enjoyments of the world, or if you hesitate to sacrifice them all when they stand in competition with him.

This also we learn from the parable of the pearl of great price. A merchant, in search of rich commodities, having discovered a pearl of peculiar excellency, abandoned every other pursuit, and relinquished all his gains, that he might purchase that one jewel. Such is the man who obtains a true knowledge of the Saviour, and becomes a member of his kingdom. It

* Psal. cxix. 162.

may be, he has long been in quest of happiness, and each favourite object appeared to him, for a time, as a beautiful gem : but he found continual disappointment till he heard of Jesus, and beheld something of his glory, when every thing else lost its former charms, and seemed trifling and worthless in comparison. Then he began to desire, most ardently, the grace of Jesus, and fixed all his attention upon that one point, being willing to sustain any loss, and renounce every advantage, for the acquisition of that high prize. Have you, then, any proper conceptions of the value of Christ, who shrink from his service, because it requires so many painful sacrifices ? Do you apprehend that you shall pay too dear for his benefits ? No, Sirs ; this is the pearl of so great price, that there can be nothing in the whole world equivalent to it. Give up interest, pleasures, reputation, friends and relatives, father, mother, brothers, sisters, wife, and children ; yet, if Jesus be yours, we will congratulate you on your immense gain. Whatever you lose, you receive “ unsearchable and durable riches ” in Him ; and therefore you may adopt the Apostle’s exultation, “ As having nothing, and yet possessing all things.”*

But let no man deceive himself. It will not suffice to “ name the name of Christ,” where there is not cordial attachment to him. And are there not many professors of the Gospel, who, by their formality, worldliness, or sensuality, disgrace the cause ? These weaken the hands and distress the hearts of faithful

* 2 Cor. vi. 10.

ministers. Yet let us not be staggered, since our Lord has taught us to expect it by the following similitude.

He subjoined another parable, taken from the practice of fishermen. They cast their net into the sea, which collects various kinds of fishes; nor can any separation of them be made till they are brought to the shore: but then the useful are preserved, and the worthless rejected. So mixed is the present state of the church, and such will be the final division of its members. Those, who preach the Gospel, go forth, as it were, upon the wide ocean of the world, to throw the net, desirous of enclosing in it all they can. Many may accordingly be taken, who may not be approved upon an exact scrutiny. And such a scrutiny will be instituted at the end of the world. Who can abide the strict examination? The angels will part the different characters asunder, however close their connexion may now be. They, who possess only the form of godliness, shall then be for ever excluded from the society of the saints, among whom they were numbered here; and their portion shall be assigned them in "the furnace of fire," where they shall for ever "wail" their sin and folly, and "gnash their teeth" through the extremity of rage, anguish, and despair.

So solemn and alarming were the addresses of Jesus. And if his servants in the Gospel endeavour to speak as he did, they must remind their hearers of the important distinction which subsists between them, and thus, by faithful admonitions, "take forth the pre-

cious from the vile.”* Their work is difficult, and often painful. How necessary is it for them to be well acquainted with the religion which they teach! Let them attend, then, to the question which Jesus proposed to his disciples: “Have ye understood all these things?” Let them consider, too, what improvement should be made. The Scribes, who are “instructed unto the kingdom of heaven,” or properly qualified to declare its mysteries, resemble the householder, who has a large family to provide for. They should therefore treasure up every useful observation, that they may always be able to communicate something from their stock, for the service of the family. While they are concerned for their own support, they must employ their fund, whatever it may be, for the benefit of those committed to them, “giving them their portion of meat in due season.”

Let prayer be offered to God without ceasing, both for them who preach and them who hear the Gospel, that the former may dispense the word with all fidelity, and the latter receive it with meekness. Let us thankfully accept the salutary provisions which the great Lord of the household has here set before us, and feed upon them to our spiritual nourishment. May we be led to try our own characters, and be alarmed or comforted, as our case may render most expedient! May God in mercy prevent us from being deceived to our eternal ruin; and, “if in any thing we be otherwise minded” than we ought to be, may he “reveal even this unto us!” Amen.

* Jer. xv. 19.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. XVIII.

*Jesus replied to some who professed a regard to him—
appealed a storm on the sea—cured two possessed
persons—rejected by the Gadarenes—returned to
Galilee—healed a woman of her bloody flux—re-
stored Jairus's daughter to life—gave sight to two
blind men—expelled a demon—preached again at
Nazareth, and in various other places.*

“**L**OOKING unto Jesus” is not only the bounden duty, but the high privilege, of the real Christian ; and therefore it will be his daily and delightful employment. Let us not be weary of contemplating our divine Exemplar. Much we have yet to learn, since we have hitherto seen but little, in comparison, of his excellency. As we attend him through the exercise of his public ministry, we shall observe him in almost every place confirming his heavenly doctrines by incontestable miracles, and affording the strongest evidence that he was indeed “ the Christ, the Saviour of the world.”

In the evening of the very same day on which he had been teaching the people by parables, he proposed to his disciples to pass over the sea, or the lake of

Genesareth.* As they prepared to take ship, a certain person, and, it should seem, a man of some note, being a Scribe, came to Jesus, professing a high regard for him, and a fixed determination to continue with him, as one of his stated followers. The appearance was pleasing and hopeful, so that we might have hastily concluded him to be a real convert. But Jesus, who "knew what was in man," discovered an insincerity of heart under this fair disguise. The Scribe probably expected some very lucrative or honourable post, as it was generally thought that the Messiah would establish a temporal dominion. Jesus, however, warned him that no worldly emoluments were to be looked for from the service of so poor and despised a Master. "The foxes," said he, "have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head."

How astonishing the declaration! How low and calamitous the situation to which "The Lord from heaven" submitted! Here then we perceive "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, that we through his poverty might be rich."† And what could his followers expect but to be sharers of his affliction, and therefore to be destitute of all present comforts and conveniences! "The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord." Such an intimation was enough to stagger the resolution of a man who

* Matt. viii. 18—27. Mark iv. 35, &c. Luke viii. 22—25, ix. 57. &c.

† 2 Cor. viii. 9.

sought only secular advantages; and it is probable that he instantly withdrew.

In another we perceive a far less regard to Jesus than was due to his high character, and in one too who seems to have been a professed disciple for some time. When our Lord called him to a stated attendance, and a renunciation of all other employments, the man was disposed to procrastinate, and therefore, with a view to excuse himself for a season, desired permission to perform the funeral solemnities of his father. The request appeared reasonable; for religion does not forbid, but rather enjoin, all due respect to be shown to friends and relations. But Jesus, knowing it to be a mere pretence, or at least a mark of some reluctancy to engage in the work of God, which might have been augmented by an interview with his former connexions, demanded an immediate compliance with the call. He replied, "Let the dead bury their dead; but go thou, and preach the kingdom of God." As if he had said, "Sooner let any office be neglected than that of the sacred ministry, to which thou art appointed. Leave it therefore to those, who being dead to God are unfit for his service, to bury their deceased kindred: but delay not thou, through any carnal regards, to enter upon and prosecute thy important function;"

An example of like sort occurred on another occasion. A third person professed a resolution to become a follower of Jesus. And what prevented him? He had certain affairs to settle, or friends to take leave of, if not to consult. This might seem to us expedient and proper; but there was a secret unsoundness,

a wrong attachment to worldly connexions, a wavering mind, a desire to regain the things which had been renounced, as in the case of Lot's wife. Our Lord, therefore, detecting his hypocrisy, replied, "No man, having put his hand to the plough and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

Do not similar instances present themselves under our own observation? Do not many "halt between two opinions?" or "turn to the Lord, not with their whole heart, but feignedly?" Their supreme affections are fixed upon secular objects; and therefore, though with fair and plausible words they declare their approbation of Christianity, they will comply with its dictates no further than their convenience will admit.

Various excuses are urged. It is said, "We have too much business of another kind, to give that attention to religion which is required;" or, "our connexions are unfavourable to our wishes, and we cannot detach ourselves from them." But will these pretexts bear a serious examination? Or will any deliberately maintain that the care of the soul and the service of Christ may be safely neglected till every worldly obstruction be removed? If you are unwilling to contend with difficulties, the Saviour will disown you, and treat you as avowed opposers.

"But we intend, after a time, to be his faithful disciples. When this or the other scheme is accomplished, we are resolved to trifle no longer, but to obey his injunctions with the utmost ardour, and without reserve." Ah! Sirs, will he admit of such an answer to the solemn call of his Gospel? He requires your sub-

mission now ; and for you to talk of yielding a compliance only on a future day, is to declare that you prefer the world to him. You do in fact, therefore, reject him, while you plead for a delay. He knows the ground of your excuses ; and remember, he detests the double mind, whatever specious disguises it may assume.

When Jesus had taken ship, and launched out into the deep, a severe storm arose, and the disciples were distressed by the apprehension of immediate destruction ; for the vessel seemed on the very point of sinking. But where was their beloved Master ? Wearied out with the labours of the preceding day, he had fallen asleep. What, could he be ignorant or regardless of the danger of his faithful attendants ? No : but he designed to try the strength of their confidence in him, and to show their security under his protection. They awoke him, and cried, in terror and anguish, “ Lord, save us, we perish.” How strange, how inconsistent, was this ! Will not the weakest believer allow that it was impossible to perish, with Jesus in the ship ? But imminent perils will sometimes render even advanced Christians strangely forgetful of their own principles, and prove them defective in faith, as indeed they are in every grace. The fears, perplexities, and despondency, which some of them discover in such situations, sufficiently evince it.

Jesus reproved them sharply for their unbelief ; and then, to encourage their unreserved reliance upon him in every future difficulty, and to demonstrate that all nature was at his command, he arose with a peculiar majesty, and spake the authoritative word : the furious

winds instantly ceased to blow, and the turbulent sea was calm. Such a grand display of his divine power astonished them: "the men marvelled." They ought, indeed, to have recollected that he was the God of the whole creation; and this very miracle might have led them to that conclusion. "O Lord God of hosts, who is a strong Lord like unto thee? Thou rulest the raging of the sea: when the waves thereof arise, thou stillest them."* But so much darkness yet remained in their minds, that they had no clear or consistent views of "the great mystery of godliness," and perhaps some of them might then consider him as no more than a human being.

The distressed situation of the disciples is an apt emblem of the church, and of many private Christians, in perilous circumstances. It is one principal part of the Redeemer's plan to exercise and prove our faith; and therefore he conducts us through various trials. He affords us his gracious presence, and, while we pass over the tempestuous sea of life, we ought to be satisfied that he is in the vessel with us. If we are his people, we must be secure, because our safety is in him. Let us not presumptuously impeach his wisdom, faithfulness, or love, when he suffers the severest storm to arise, though he should even then seem regardless of our danger. Our busy fears may suggest that we shall surely be lost, and we may be almost overwhelmed with perplexity and despair. His design is that we should show an entire and cheerful dependence upon him; but we soon betray our unbelief, and treat him, as the dis-

* Psal. lxxxix. 8, 9.

ciples did. If, then, we can trust him no longer than while the calm continues, “where is our faith?” Or, “why are we so fearful?” Let us be ashamed of our doubtful and suspicious temper; and, adoring the power and grace of this mighty God and Saviour, let us learn, with unshaken confidence, to repose ourselves and our concerns in his hands.

The storm being appeased, they arrived in safety at the country of the Gadarenes, opposite to Galilee; and immediately an occasion was offered for the exhibition of his divine character, which excited general attention.* There met him two persons possessed with devils, in a state of the utmost distraction and fury, driven out from society, and incapable of being governed or restrained.† Many circumstances in this case are not to be accounted for on any other supposition than that of a real demoniacal influence. We here perceive, indeed, an awful representation of the wretchedness in which we should be involved, if subjected to the malice of infernal spirits. A considerable number (for their name was Legion) had entered into these unhappy men, and reduced them to the most miserable condition. When our Lord beheld the pitiable objects, he commanded the demons to quit their hold. This they were unwilling to do; and yet they were constrained to acknowledge the superior power of Jesus, as “the Son of the most high God;” and were terrified at his presence, as criminals before their judge. Being

* Matt. viii. 28, &c. ix. 1. Mark v. 1—21. Luke viii. 26—40.

† As St. Mark and St. Luke mention only one person, it should seem that one was more fierce, and therefore more an object of notice, than the other.

perfectly aware of that extremity of torment, which will shortly be executed upon them by Christ himself, they requested that their final punishment might not be inflicted before the time. They entreated him also not to dismiss them entirely from that country ; and, probably with a mischievous and destructive intention, desired permission to enter into a numerous herd of swine in the neighbourhood. Permission accordingly was granted, not to gratify, but confound, their malice ; and immediately the whole herd, to the amount of two thousand, rushed into the deep with violence, and perished in the waters.

This was a remarkable transaction. It has been treated with impious ridicule ; but it ought to be observed, as a sufficient answer to objections, that, by this very occurrence, Jesus has demonstrated the reality of possessions, the malevolence of infernal spirits, and their entire subjection to him ; for they owned his dominion when they solicited his leave to execute their purpose. He, displayed, likewise, his boundless mercy, in “destroying the works of the devil.” At the same time, those who had kept the swine were justly punished, by the loss of them, for their avarice and profaneness, as their employment and traffic were illegal. Let us love and praise our gracious Redeemer, who has come to deliver us from so miserable a bondage as that of the power of darkness. Let us entreat his exertions in our own behalf, and cry to him, “O Lord, give us not over to their malice, but, by thy mighty aid, extricate us out of their hands, and bring us into the glorious liberty of thy dear children !”

The report of this event caused a general consternation among the inhabitants. They flocked in great multitudes to see the Person who had wrought so stupendous a miracle ; and, as if struck with a sense of their guilt, and afraid of his presence, lest he should bring some deserved judgments upon them, they unanimously requested him to “ depart out of their coasts.” Little did they understand what they asked. Shall sinners petition that the Lord of life and glory would leave them to themselves ? How dreadful must be the consequence ! Better be destitute of all, both friends and substance, than be deserted by the Saviour. Yet such is the folly and stupidity of men ; they are unwilling to abandon their sensual pleasures and worldly advantages, or to be disturbed in their old practices, however unjustifiable ; and, therefore, they put from them the ministers and the Gospel of Christ, madly supposing they shall be happier without them. They say unto God, “ Depart from us ; for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways.”*

How different is the disposition of those who have a true spiritual discernment ! They desire nothing so much as the presence of Christ, and communion with him. Their language is, “ When wilt thou come unto me ? O make thine abode with me, and let me remain under thy shadow !” The persons who had been delivered from Satan’s influence were instantly restored to reason and comfort ; and they were observed to be “ sitting at the feet of Jesus,” impressed, no doubt, with unspeakable admiration and gratitude for the

* Job xxi. 14.

grace bestowed upon them. They wished to accompany him upon his departure, and solicited his permission "that they might be with him." But he intended them to be the instruments of usefulness among the people, who were so deeply immersed in ignorance and sin. Though he himself deserted the country, he determined to leave these his chosen witnesses there, and therefore sent them to publish throughout their neighbourhood "what great things the Lord had done for them."

We also, considering ourselves alone, may wish to be constantly sitting at the feet of Jesus, under the instructions of his mouth, and the light of his countenance. But, for the present, he has assigned us other work, to which we must attend. We must bear our testimony for him, in the midst of a dark world, "holding forth the word of life," if not by public preaching, yet by our private conversation, and show, in our respective places, "what great things he has done for us." Where are those, then, who have such an evidence to give? What have you received at his hands? He yet distributes his gifts, and works deliverance for men. Have you experienced his power to save? Are you the monuments of his grace? Then commend him to others, and declare to your husband, wife, parents, or children, what he can accomplish for them.

Upon his crossing the lake again, and returning to Galilee, multitudes awaited his arrival, and welcomed him with the liveliest joy. How different the reception which he met with in different places! Imme-

diately various applications for relief were made to him, which afforded fresh evidence of his power and compassion.*

It has been repeatedly observed that few persons of rank paid any regard to Jesus; but distress will sometimes constrain those, who would otherwise be most reluctant, to come to him. Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue, and therefore of some eminence, under the apprehension of losing his only daughter, about twelve years of age, who appeared in a dying state, represented her case to Jesus, and, with expressions of profound veneration for his character, most earnestly entreated his gracious interposition. Our Lord acceded to his request, and followed him without delay, accompanied by immense crowds, who were desirous to witness the event.

A circumstance occurred by the way, which deserves our notice. A poor diseased woman, who had suffered exceedingly by a bloody flux for twelve years, and had spent her whole substance upon physicians without obtaining relief, heard of the extraordinary works of Jesus, and felt a strong persuasion in her mind that he had power to heal her. Yet, afraid, or ashamed, to describe her situation, she came behind him, and touched the border of his garment, in a believing expectation of a cure. The cure was instantly performed; and such was the change produced within her, as to convince her of its reality. This was entirely concealed from the observation of the people; but Jesus, who was privy to the whole, determined to use the

* Matt. ix. 18--34. Mark v. 22, &c. Luke viii. 41, &c.

woman's testimony, and to acquaint them with it. At first, through the tremour of her spirits, and an apprehension of being reprov'd for presumption, she was unwilling to appear ; but, finding it in vain to hide herself, she came forward, and, with many tears, declared the miracle in public. Thus he was pleas'd to manifest his own supernatural influence, and her humble dependence ; and for the encouragement, not of her alone, but of others, he said, " Daughter, be of good comfort, thy faith hath made thee whole : go in peace."

Here was an instance of much weakness, mixed with real belief ; and hereby we are taught that Jesus has compassion on our infirmities, and despises not " the day of small things." Come unto him, you who have many fears. Come, however hopeless your case may seem. Like this poor woman, you may have sought relief in vain for a long season ; or rather, like her, you may grow worse and worse. The reason is, your application has hitherto been to " physicians of no value." But, turning from all others to Jesus Christ, reach forth your hand, though it be with much trembling, and desire in faith " to touch him ;" and immediately " virtue will go out of him," for the perfecting your recovery.

Before the ruler of the synagogue had reached his own habitation, a fresh trial arose, enough to shake his confidence. A messenger inform'd him that his daughter was actually dead, and therefore that it was needless for Jesus to proceed any further. Still, however, the Saviour, who attend'd him, encourag'd him to believe and expect her restoration. They came at length to

the house, where great lamentations were made for the beloved child; and so unquestionable were the marks of her dissolution, that the intimation of her revival was derided. But Jesus, to whom "belong the issues from death," with a peculiar display of majesty called her forth again to life and vigour. The event, so confessedly miraculous, filled all those who had observed it with unspeakable astonishment; but, to avoid ostentation, or for reasons of prudence, he requested them not to divulge it.

The little narrative conveys much instruction to us. We perceive how uncertain are all human comforts, and are taught to look for painful trials in our families, as well as in our own persons. In such circumstances we may imitate the conduct of Jairus, and apply to Jesus for relief! Yet, while we are waiting for his help, it is possible, that, for the further exercise of our faith, increasing troubles may come upon us. Then, in an especial manner, we are required to believe; nor is any deliverance too great to be expected from that Jesus "who quickeneth the dead."

As he departed then, two blind men followed him with the most importunate cries for relief: "Thou Son of David, have mercy on us." Nor was their petition vain. They were instantly restored to sight; and, though charged with secrecy, they published abroad, probably from emotions of the warmest gratitude, the kindness of their Benefactor.

Immediately afterward, a dumb person under a demoniacal possession was brought to him, and received a perfect cure at his hands. Well might the people,

overwhelmed with astonishment, confess "It was never so seen in Israel." What, then, prevented him from being universally acknowledged in his proper character, as the promised Redeemer? The Pharisees exerted their influence against him, and, though they disputed not the facts, blasphemously ascribed them to the agency of Satan. Their malicious cavils had been fully refuted before, and yet they continued to urge the same absurd charges. Just so, in the present day, the weak and profane objections of infidels, which have been repeatedly answered, are produced afresh, and with as much petulance and acrimony as ever. But shall not we conclude, from the stupendous miracles of Jesus, that he is "mighty to save?" And, since his power and grace have suffered no diminution, may we not encourage the children of affliction, in all their various distresses, to commend their cases to him, and expect seasonable and effectual relief?

After the above-mentioned occurrences, Jesus returned to Nazareth, the place of his education.* The inhabitants of this city had basely rejected him already, and even attempted to destroy him; yet he did not forsake them, but again delivered his solemn instructions in their synagogue on the sabbath-day. Many of them felt a powerful impression from his preaching. They were astonished at his words: but no good effect ensued; for they took offence. Various objections were raised, chiefly from his mean extraction, the poverty of his relations, and the low trade to which he was brought up. They looked for a Messiah of high ori-

* Matt. xiii. 54, &c. ix. 35, &c. Mark vi. 1--6.

ginal, invested with worldly honour, pomp, and dominion; and they determined never to receive the man in that exalted character whom they knew to be destitute of all such attractive distinctions.

Opposition of a similar nature is made, among ourselves. The grand doctrines of the Gospel are often treated with scorn, because they are not acceptable to "wise men after the flesh, the mighty or the noble;" and the truth of Christ is denied, without examination, because some of its advocates possess no eminence of rank or abilities. Prejudices of this kind, though extremely absurd, frequently operate most effectually, and prove destructive. O beware! while you are giving way to captious disputation, Jesus may withdraw. He left Nazareth, and, probably, never more returned. He wrought some miracles among them, and they had credible information of what he performed in other places: but "he did not many mighty works there; nay, HE COULD NOT, because of their unbelief." How fatal the consequences of their obstinate infidelity! It stopped the hand of Jesus, and expelled him from their city. He expressed his astonishment at their perverseness; but he ceased to argue with them. O fear their condemnation, if your minds are ill affected towards him! While you are raising this or the other objection, he may take his Gospel from you, and send it to another people.

Not discouraged with the persecution at Nazareth, he turned his attention to different towns. He declined not the most arduous exertions, but continued to labour from one city and village to another, declaring

the good tidings of salvation, and performing unparalleled acts of mercy. Every where he was followed by immense multitudes, on whom he looked with the most compassionate regard. "They fainted," probably with bodily fatigue : but their spiritual state especially, which was most deplorable, excited his tenderest pity. "They were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd." Their pretended guides were such as knew not how to direct them, and cared not for their safety. Therefore they wandered in the paths of ignorance and sin, which would infallibly lead them to destruction, Alas ! what could be done for them? They discovered an earnest desire to be instructed in the word of life ; but there were few to teach it. He exhorted his disciples, then, to offer up fervent prayer that God would "give them pastors according to his own heart." Their serious attendance upon his ministry, in such large numbers, was like the promising appearances of the fields, which denoted a plentiful harvest ; but labourers were wanted to reap and gather in the valuable produce. And to whom should application be made but to the great Proprietor, who must be concerned for the event? Petitions, therefore, should be addressed to him, to supply the deficiency, that by a suitable provision of diligent and faithful men, the rich fruit may be secured for himself, and precious souls no longer "destroyed for lack of knowledge."

Such a tender regard for the spiritual and everlasting happiness of the human race was a distinguishing feature in the character of Jesus. This, and this alone, is true benevolence. Where are those, who feel the same

generous principle, the same ardent desire to promote the salvation of sinners? You, then, will rejoice to see the multitudes of poor ignorant persons, who flock to hear the Gospel preached with plainness and fidelity. Yet you will lament that so few, even of those whose office demands it of them, labour with assiduity to save immortal creatures from destruction. Much of the harvest seems likely to be lost, for want of proper assistance to collect it. O, what fervent prayer should you present to God on this account! Pray that He himself would send forth his servants, endued with all suitable abilities to do his work. He must ordain them to their high function; and He alone can assist and prosper them. Thousands, alas! among us, are "scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd." If such be your wretched case, be thankful that there are any who are "moved with compassion on you," and who "watch for your souls." They desire to recover you from your wandering state, to bring you back to the fold of Christ, and to lead you into his "green pastures," where are safety and refreshment. Be willing to follow their directions; and, whatever difficulties they may suffer from other quarters, let them meet with no opposition from you, since it is your salvation for which they labour incessantly. You have been "as sheep going astray;" O "return unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls!"*

* 1 Pet. ii, 25.

J E S U S C H R I S T.

SECT. XIX.

Jesus sent forth his twelve Apostles, with miraculous powers, and gave them a solemn charge, for their direction and encouragement.

ONE principal purpose of our Lord's ministry was to propagate divine truth, and, in particular, to declare and explain the appointed way of access unto God. But, as his public life was so short, and his labours met with so many obstructions, it became expedient to select some faithful men, furnished with proper instructions, to assist him in the work. He had already separated twelve persons out of his constant attendants, who were to observe his directions, and to be employed as chief officers in his church. He had gradually prepared and fitted them for the apostolic function: but hitherto they had acted only under his immediate notice; and now, for the first time, he proceeded to send them out upon a circuit by themselves.*

“No man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God.”† The chosen witnesses of

* Matt. x. 1, &c. xi. 1. Mark vi. 7—13. Luke ix. 1—6.

† Heb. v. 4.

Jesus did not obtrude themselves upon him, but waited his summons. He, the great Lord of the harvest, appoints his labourers to their respective posts. When he had assembled them together, in order to deliver their sacred commission to them, he endowed them with miraculous powers, by which, as unquestionable credentials, they might recommend their doctrine, and demonstrate its truth. They were enabled, with a word, to cast out devils, and to cure the most inveterate diseases.

We offer no remarks, in this place, on the names, characters, and connexions of the Apostles, observing only, in general, that we need not inquire any other reason for their selection than the sovereign will and pleasure of the Lord himself. "Ye have not chosen me," said he, "but I have chosen you."* And therefore to the most eminent of them the question might be put, "Who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive?"†

Before their departure, like a tender father concerned for the welfare of his children, whom he is sending out into the world, foreseeing difficulties, snares, and dangers, he instructed, he warned, he encouraged them, with much solemnity and affection. He directed them to go in pairs, "by two and two," that they might afford mutual support and comfort to each other. At first, their commission was subject to certain limitations. They were to address themselves only to the house of Israel; nor were they empowered to offer sal-

* John xv. 16.

† 1 Cor. iv. 7.

vation to any other people till his final separation from them. This was a peculiar honour and favour bestowed upon the Jews : but, alas ! how little were they sensible of the privilege ! “ They knew not the time of their visitation.” Do you ask the reason of this marked distinction, or accuse the Saviour of partiality in the distribution of his blessings ? He is not accountable to you for any of his matters. He has an indubitable right to do what He will with his own ; and, therefore, to send or to withhold his Gospel, as He pleaseth.

But what was the grand object of the embassy of the Apostles ? Hear the purport of their instructions ; “ As heralds, proclaim with a loud voice, and with all the zeal and courage which such a cause demands, that God is now visiting his people in mercy, and about to set up the promised kingdom of the Redeemer. In attestation of your sacred commission, and of the truth of your doctrine, to prove also that your ministry is designed to answer the most gracious and benevolent purposes, exert the miraculous powers now intrusted to you, as opportunity shall be given, for the relief of the distressed, and not for your own private emolument, which you must cheerfully renounce.”

From this part of the charge, how excellent does the religion of Jesus appear ! It brings the most reviving intelligence, as it “ proclaims the acceptable year of the Lord.” It proposes blessings the most valuable, represented by those supernatural cures which the Apostles wrought and dispensed freely, “ without money and without price,” where no recompense can be expected. Shall we not rejoice that “ the king-

dom of heaven" is come unto us? Or shall we hesitate to receive the gracious declarations of these primitive heralds, who exhibited incontestable evidence that they were no other than ambassadors from God? We are assured that in crediting their message we "follow not cunningly-devised fables," while we perceive that "God bore them witness both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will."* We are thankful that their commission, at first so circumscribed, was afterwards enlarged, and that they were commanded to "go into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature."† Otherwise, how would the blessing have been extended to us? But, praised be God, He hath sent his word to the Gentiles, and "granted to them also repentance unto life."‡

Imagine the twelve standing round their Lord, to receive the law at his mouth, while he proceeds in his address, and gives them directions for their conduct. As they were totally unfurnished for their intended expedition, and without any visible means of subsistence, it is probable that anxious thoughts might arise in their minds about obtaining the necessary supplies. But thus the Saviour instructed them; "Of that kind of provision, which men generally make for a journey, you will have no need. Nay, you are forbidden to take such things with you as perhaps you might procure, and prudence might seem to require. You are to expect your constant support from that God in whose cause you go forth. "Upon Him," therefore, "cast all

* Heb. ii. 4. † Mark xvi. 15. ‡ Acts xi. 18.

your care, for he careth for you ;” nor doubt that his providence will sustain you, though it should be in an extraordinary way. Some will be disposed to show you kindness; and you should not scruple to accept your proper maintenance at the hands of those for whom you labour.”

“ Upon your first entrance into a town, inquire for such persons as are of the best character. With them abide, if they are willing to receive you ; nor leave them in fickleness or disgust, whatever your accommodations may be ; for you ought not to be solicitous about matters so trifling as mere convenience. When you are admitted into their houses, pay them all due courtesy and respect ; and, as the ministers of peace, express your good wishes for their peace and comfort. The benediction which you solemnly pronounce shall rest upon those families which are well affected to my Gospel ; but it will not profit such as continue in unbelief. Your prayers, however, though ineffectual for others, will not be lost ; for they shall bring down the blessing of God upon your own heads. A tremendous wo awaits those who obstinately reject you ; and, while you depart from them, you may intimate their awful state by shaking off the dust of your feet, and thus representing the very place as utterly defiled and devoted to destruction. In the grand, the decisive, day of judgment, those, who have refused to obey the word of my grace, shall perish with more aggravated ruin than even Sodom and Gomorrah, under the vengeance of Almighty God.”

In this address we discover some discriminating mark of the faithful preachers of the Gospel in every age. May God raise up among ourselves men of this description, to testify "the truth, as it is in Jesus!" It becomes them not to be anxious for their own temporal support, much less to covet worldly dignities or sensual indulgences. While they carry with them a message of peace and love, they should prove, by the kindness of their deportment, that they wish to promote the happiness of all. Yet, in perfect consistence with this meekness, they should possess such a courage and fidelity as "to declare all the counsel of God," and solemnly to warn contemptuous sinners of impending destruction. Is the duty of ministers allowed? But do you, to whom they come, consider also what you owe to them and their doctrine? Do you honour their office? Do you seriously regard their exhortations? Possibly a bold and unreserved declaration of the truth may excite your disgust, and draw forth the hidden corruptions of your hearts; at least it will evince your real dispositions. O beware! Those who long for your salvation must admonish you, that you do not, by a scornful rejection of them, bring upon yourselves certain and aggravated condemnation. Though they do not rank themselves with the Apostles, yet the Gospel which they preach has lost nothing of its importance or obligation by the course of time; and the God of heaven is as much concerned now as ever to vindicate its honour. Most assuredly, therefore, though "the men of Sodom were sinners before the Lord ex-

ceedingly,"* yet, if you refuse or "neglect so great salvation," your guilt is more heinous than theirs, and your everlasting misery will be far more insupportable.

The Apostles had nothing but violent opposition to expect from the wickedness of the world, or, rather, from the corruption of human nature. Their gracious Master, therefore, prepared them for it, suggesting, at the same time, various considerations to encourage their hopes, and invigorate their zeal. He proceeded, in a most affecting manner, to the following purpose:—

"Though you are going forth at my command, in my name, and under my protection, you will not be exempt from enemies. You are to be meek and inoffensive; but you will be surrounded by those, who, being of furious dispositions, may endeavour to harass and devour you. It may be right to use every precaution which prudence may dictate for your own preservation; but beware of "rendering evil for evil;" and learn rather to "suffer long, and be kind."

"Knowing the general depravity of men, trust not yourselves in their hands, but be prepared to meet with bitter persecution from them for your attachment to me. With a show of justice, they will bring you to trial in their courts, and condemn you to the most painful tortures, as the worst of criminals. In this manner, you may have occasion to stand before the great men of the earth, and you will embrace the opportunity, to bear witness of me and of my salvation, which otherwise they might not hear of. Such an attestation will be an honour to you, and may prove the

* Gen. xiii. 13.

means of spiritual benefit to them. Are you discouraged by an apprehension that you shall not be able to speak as you ought, in your own justification, before such auditors? You shall be inspired with wisdom from above; and it shall be immediately suggested by the Holy Ghost what you should advance in vindication of yourselves and the Gospel."

"Nor shall your enemies be those only whose regard you have no peculiar claim to, but even your nearest relatives in life will rise up with furious and murderous rage against you. Brethren, parents, and children, will break through the ties of natural affection, while they are opposing and endeavouring to destroy each other, from a hatred of the truth. Such a bitterness of persecution you will meet with in every place, on account of your cordial regard to me, that you will be held up as the objects of universal detestation. But maintain your integrity, and your firmness in the faith, without wavering; and, whatever you may suffer by the way, the end will bring a glorious recompense."

"Resistance may drive you from one city, but immediately carry your message to another. Enough remains to be done, nor will you complete your progress through the various parts of Judea till I appear, in awful visitation, to vindicate my cause against its opponents."

"Are you surprised or staggered at being called out to such painful trials? Remember what I, your Lord and Master, have to endure, and what vile reproaches are cast upon my name; and be content that your treatment in the world should resemble mine. Let not

your adversaries terrify or discourage you ; for the day is at hand when their malignity and your integrity shall be clearly exhibited, and all these dark dispensations unfolded to your view. In the mean time, keep back nothing through fear or reserve ; but faithfully and publicly proclaim aloud whatever I have revealed to you in secret. Let them condemn you to the severest tortures : you know the utmost that their malicious rage can inflict. They may destroy the life of the body ; but the soul, which is the nobler part, is removed far beyond their reach ; so that, though the unanimated flesh be soon reduced to its original dust, the immortal spirit will remain in perfect vigour. But, oh ! dread the thought of coming under the indignation of your Almighty Sovereign, whose power extends to another world, and who can render you completely miserable, both in body and soul, and that throughout all eternity.”

“ Be not distressed by the apprehension of such calamitous events as may await you here. The God of heaven and earth, whose immediate charge you are, cannot forget or desert you. He exercises an universal providence ; so that he marks and determines the situation of every creature, though ever so small or worthless, and disposes all their circumstances as He pleases. You, therefore, who are in a peculiar manner the objects of his care, and most valuable in his esteem, may cheerfully confide in his protection. He knows and overrules your minutest concerns, and on this ground you should possess an unshaken fortitude in his service.”

“ Are you, then, bold and faithful in your profession and defence of my truth? You shall be gloriously distinguished as my beloved friends, and receive a public approbation, and a high recompense of reward, in the presence of my heavenly Father. But those, who, through shame, cowardice, or any worldly regards, shrink from that open declaration of attachment to me, and from those exertions of duty which my Gospel requires, shall be disowned and rejected, with everlasting abhorrence, for the baseness and malignity of their conduct.”

“ You may have expected much outward prosperity and peace from the coming of the Messiah, and the establishment of his kingdom; but the real consequence will be directly contrary. Though the tendency of my religion be most excellent, yet, through the corruption of man opposing it, all manner of confusion and violence will ensue. The fiercest contentions between the nearest relatives will take place; so that none, probably, will be so incensed against my faithful servants, as those who may dwell in the same family, and are connected with them by the closest bonds of friendship and of kindred.”

“ It is necessary, then, that you should be prepared for the most painful separation. If there be any one, even parent or child, whose favour you prefer to mine, you can have no proper sense of my worth, or of my claims upon you; nor can you possess any part in my salvation. You must be willing to sacrifice your ease, your reputation, and secular interest, for my sake and the Gospel's, and resolutely submit to all hardships and

indignities. I, your Leader and Commander, go before you, and therefore you should not hesitate to follow me through much tribulation. Perhaps a violent death may close your sufferings here. Be it so. Those who apostatize from me may lengthen out their existence upon earth a few days longer ; but they shall be destroyed for ever ; while you, who may shed your blood in my cause and service, shall live and reign, beyond the reach of persecutors, in everlasting happiness and glory. This is enough surely to fix your determination, and inspire you with increasing confidence and zeal."

" You will sustain an important character ; nor is it a matter of indifference how you are treated in the world. I solemnly declare, that whatever kindness is shown unto you, while you are acting in my name, it shall be considered as a mark of unfeigned regard to me and my Father ; for you go forth as our representatives and ambassadors. He who shall cordially receive my prophets or ministers for the sake of that Gospel which they preach, or even any faithful disciples in private life, from a pure disinterested respect to their character, shall be abundantly repaid for his pious liberality towards them ; he shall partake with them of that bliss and glory to which they shall shortly be admitted."

" I commend you, therefore, as my dear children, to the notice of all who are concerned for my cause. If any one shall afford you the least attention or refreshment by the way, administering only a cup of cold water for your relief, because you belong to me, and are employed in my service, I pledge myself to return

that act of kindness in an ample manner. I will not forget, but publicly own, approve, and reward, the labours of love which shall be wrought for my name's sake."

Such was the purport of our Lord's most affecting address to his twelve Apostles, when he sent them forth to evangelize the land. Such tender and earnest wishes did he express for their encouragement, support, and success in their arduous work. Having received their commission and the solemn charge, they proceeded, as they were directed, on the momentous expedition. They carried with them from place to place the gracious overtures of reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ, and called upon all, without exception, to humble themselves before him, under a conviction of their guilt, and to turn from their evil ways with sincere contrition and renovation of heart. Nor did Jesus himself cease from his own vigorous exertions. He continued to bear part of the burden, and persevered in his progress, that he might diffuse the knowledge of salvation all around.

While we contemplate the office and character of the Apostles, as here exhibited, we are furnished with strong arguments for the authenticity and salutary tendency of the Gospel. Such a plan could never be the contrivance of men: it must be "the power of God, and the wisdom of God."* It is also so replete with blessings calculated to relieve our wretchedness, that we need not hesitate to pronounce it "worthy of all acceptance."† The subject will likewise lead us, as

* 1 Cor. i. 24.

† 1 Tim. i. 15.

we have already intimated, to consider what manner of persons they ought to be in modern times, who are the "ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God." The case of these primitive ambassadors was, in many respects, peculiar. But all those, surely, to whom "the word of reconciliation is committed," should possess the same views and dispositions which were required in them.

We may carry the application further, and remark that the holy and heavenly tempers here inculcated are indispensably necessary, not merely for those who preach, but for those who profess, the Gospel. Though you be not invested with a public office in the church of Christ, yet, as called by his name, you should be meek, gentle, and inoffensive. You must be willing to bear the most ignominious and scornful treatment for the sake of your Lord and Master. You must cheerfully submit to the heaviest calamities, in the way of duty, without distrusting the providence of God; and, in every possible situation, avow your attachment to Christ, whatever painful consequences you may suffer. You can never be at liberty to deny him, though your most beloved friends, or those on whom you depend for sustenance, should require you to do it. Let father and mother, wife and children, be dear to you, as they ought to be; but let Jesus be dearer than all. He claims and he deserves your cordial and supreme regard. You do not, therefore, understand his excellency, or your obligations to him, unless you prefer his favour, and the advancement of his glory, to every worldly possession or enjoyment, unless you can give

up your nearest kindred, your reputation, emolument, ease, or life itself, for his sake, whenever they come in competition.

Where then shall we find such love to the Saviour, such zeal for his name? It is evident that many are totally destitute of these holy principles. Are there not those who are enslaved to sensual pleasures, and determined, as far as possible, to gratify every inclination of their hearts? And to what purpose should we inculcate upon them the necessity of taking up the cross, and following Jesus? they would turn away their ears in contempt or indignation. Yet we must declare the offensive truth, that "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life," are as inconsistent with real Christianity now as they were in primitive times. "Whosoever, therefore, will be a friend of the world, is the enemy of God."*

Is it sufficient to assume expressions of respect, and, with demure appearance, upon your bended knees, to pretend a high regard for the Saviour, while you are afraid to advance one step further in his service than may be agreeable to the general maxims and customs of the place in which you live? Does he not account such compliments an insult more odious to him than an avowed opposition? This temporizing spirit is as foolish as it is sinful; it pleads prudence, but it tends to destruction. You may contrive to avoid persecution, and procure applause and preferment among men; but what will these avail if Jesus disown you? What shame, confusion, and horror, will overwhelm you, when

* James iv. 4.

convicted, before the assembled universe, of treating him with insolent contempt!

May we all, therefore, be persuaded to follow him wherever he shall lead, and to undergo all extremities in his service! Why such a regard to present conveniences? Why such fear of our fellow-creatures, and distrust of God? Do not these things argue much unbelief, and betray an earthly mind? Let us rise above our little difficulties, and confide in that God who takes care for the very sparrows, and hath numbered the hairs of our heads. He will not be inattentive to our wants, even in this life, if we be faithful to him: and a glorious reward is laid up in heaven for those who are willing to hazard every consequence, from a zealous adherence to his cause. Relying on his promise, may we now surrender ourselves and our all to him! Then shall we stand with confidence and joy before him at the great day of his appearing. Amen.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. XX.

Jesus, on the return of his Apostles, withdrew with them—fed five thousand by a miracle—retired from the multitude—walked on the sea—stilled the tempest—taught in the synagogue at Capernaum—cavilled at by the Jews, and forsaken by many disciples.

As we advance in the prosecution of our design, and contemplate the wonderful acts of the Son of man, we meet with additional proofs of his high dignity, and the perfection of his character. If we fix our attentive regard on this bright Luminary, such beams of glory will break forth upon us as will fill, and almost overpower, the soul with admiration of his excellency.

When the Apostles returned from the circuit on which they were sent, they brought back to their Lord an account of their ministry, of the miracles they had performed, and the doctrines they had taught.* Immediately he withdrew with them to a solitary place, that they might be relieved from their fatigue, and, probably, that they might retire for the purposes of devotion. This was the more necessary, as the vast

* Matt. xiv. 13, &c. Mark vi. 30, &c. Luke ix. 10, &c. John vi. 1, &c.

crowds of people allowed them no leisure. It is expedient for all, especially for those who are actively employed in the sacred functions of religion, to secure some moments to themselves, by retreating from their public engagements, that both their minds and bodies may be recruited.

To obtain the desired privacy, he passed over a part of the sea of Galilee; and great multitudes, who had observed his departure, followed him with much eagerness, "because they saw his miracles." They were induced to attend him, many at least, we fear, by no better motives than curiosity or astonishment. The compassionate Jesus, however, upon coming to the shore, where they were ready to receive him, could not look upon them without feeling the most tender concern for their state, remarking, as he had done on a former occasion, that "they were as sheep not having a shepherd." On this account, foregoing his intended rest, he began to renew his labours, and went up with them to a mountain, that he might be heard with convenience: there he opened the nature of his kingdom, and manifested his power by restoring health and vigour to them that were diseased. Blessed Jesus! we beseech thee still to look with pity "on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way." How immense are their numbers, and how wretched is their condition! Stretch out thine arm to recover them from the paths of error, and reveal thy glories to them. Instruct them in thy truth, and take them into thy fold, as the sheep of thy pasture.

At the close of the day, the disciples, having no

stock of provisions, would have dismissed the people. But Jesus, unwilling to send them away without refreshment, proposed a distribution of the food which was at hand. Accordingly, at his word, preparations were made for the wondrous entertainment. They were all marshalled in ranks, and seated in the open air upon the grass. But whence shall a sufficient quantity of meat be procured for so large a multitude; as there were present five thousand men, besides women and children? This was, indeed, a severe trial of the faith of his disciples, who were able to produce no greater store than five loaves and two small fishes. These, however, were brought forth, and, in the hands of Jesus, by an all-creating power, they were so multiplied as to be more than enough to satisfy the whole company. "They did all eat, and were filled;" and, when the fragments were collected, it was found that such had been the miraculous increase, that the remainder far exceeded the original provisions.

What a grandeur do we perceive in this entertainment, surpassing that which attends the most sumptuous tables of princes! What a fervour of devotion appeared in the great Master of the feast, while he looked up in prayer for the divine blessing, and taught the people to expect their food from Heaven! What an exalted majesty, mixed with the kindest condescension, distinguished his behaviour! Was not every one, then, struck with admiration, and disposed to revere and love him? They concluded without hesitation, and they concluded rightly, "This is of a truth that Prophet that should come into the world."

Do we draw the same inference? There are strong and convincing reasons which should lead us to it. When we compare the ancient predictions of the Messiah with the various parts of the life and character of Jesus, we must allow their accomplishment in him, and maintain that he is indeed the promised Saviour. Yet it is possible that the evidence may constrain us to assent to the fact, even while we refuse to give to this Prophet that regard which his high office demands from us. Are we, then, with profound veneration sitting at his feet, and looking to him for instruction? Do we understand or credit that message which he has brought from Heaven? Are we not strangely perverse and infatuated if we acknowledge him to be the Teacher of Israel, the Christ of God, and yet remain unconcerned about his doctrine? Either say at once, He is a base impostor, which few will dare to assert; or else bow with unfeigned submission to him, and pray, "Shew me thy ways, O Lord, and teach me thy paths. Make known to me the glorious truths of thy salvation; and speak effectually to my heart, for thy servant heareth."

Or, allowing his sacred character, are we afraid to follow him? The miracle we have considered is calculated to fix and confirm our dependence upon him, as able to provide for our support, and exercising a tender care for our bodies as well as souls. If we are ever so necessitous, we perceive with what ease he can multiply our store. In a thousand ways, which we cannot foresee, he can furnish our tables with plenty. This very instruction was meant to be conveyed to us;

and, accordingly, the disciples were afterwards reproved for not remembering the extraordinary occurrence to better purpose, when they were apprehensive of wanting bread to eat.* Let us learn, then, to "cast all our care upon him," believing that he will "feed us with food convenient for us."

The astonished multitude, concluding him to be the Messiah, and expecting, agreeably to their carnal notions, that he would set up a temporal dominion, were desirous immediately to invest him with regal honours. But, so far from entertaining any ambitious designs, or discovering any ostentation, he took pains to avoid public notice and applause. He now withdrew from them in haste. He directed his disciples, also, to depart, and to cross the lake to Bethsaida: perhaps he was anxious to prevent them from favouring the foolish wishes of the people. In the mean time he himself retired to a mountain for prayer, and spent the chief part of the night in his private devotions. Ah! how unlike to him are those of his professed followers, who are solicitous to procure and preserve the pomp and power of this present world! Or, what resemblance to the holy Jesus do those bear, who have no relish for religious solitude, and can spare no time for the exalted purpose of maintaining communion with God?

The disciples were on the sea, where they were overtaken by a storm, and tossed about, for many hours together, upon the boisterous waves. Their situation was distressing: the night was dark, the water

* Matt. xvi. 9

tempestuous, the wind violent and contrary: they had spent their strength in vain with rowing; dangers threatened them; and their dear Lord and Master was absent. Jesus, however, could not be unmindful of them; he knew their difficulties, and drew near for their help. He had been retired till near the morning, when he came to them "walking upon the sea." How did he convince them of their safety under his protection! How did he encourage them to face every storm, in his service, while they saw the deep itself subject to his command!

So strange was the sight, that, as they imagined it was not possible for a real human body to be supported by the waves, they concluded it was an apparition, and gave way to perplexing fears. But he, to relieve them from their distress, graciously revealed himself, saying, "Be of good cheer; it is I; be not afraid." This was enough. The sound of his voice, speaking comfort in such awful circumstances, revived and cheered their hearts. Peter supposed that he also should be able to walk on the boisterous sea, if his Lord would permit him to attempt it. The leave, which he rashly solicited, was granted, that his forwardness might be checked by a sad proof of the weakness of his principles. When he felt the violence of the storm, his faith failed, and he began to sink; so that, if Jesus had not stretched out his compassionate hand to save him, he must have perished in the deep.

Jesus then entered the vessel, and restored peace and comfort to his disciples. Immediately the rage of the

wind abated, and they were brought to the very point of land which they aimed at. What proofs of power, what marks of dignity, were here ! Yet what modesty and condescension appeared in our Lord's constant deportment ! He did not display his ability in an ostentatious manner, or even for his own accommodation. He submitted to travel on foot, with much fatigue, when he could have instantly transported himself to the most distant place. His attendants were filled with inexpressible astonishment, and the more so as they had not duly considered the miracle of the preceding day. They fell down before him, with the strongest emotions of gratitude and love, and with expressions of profound adoration, crying out, "Of a truth, thou art the Son of God !" The inhabitants, also, of the neighbouring coasts, no sooner received intelligence of him, than they flocked after him with great eagerness, entreating his compassion toward the sick ; and, merely by the touch of his garment, the most inveterate diseases were removed.

Shall not We, likewise, be encouraged to apply to him, who has all power in his hand, and who, in so many instances, has proved himself "mighty to save ?" Our faith may be tried, as that of his disciples was and, probably, our weakness will soon be evinced. "Lord, help our unbelief." He is often pleased to suffer a violent storm to arise, and his people may seem as if they were left alone upon the deep, toiling in extreme distress, ready to perish. But he will graciously interpose, in due season, to save them. He will mani-

fest himself to them, appease the rage of the tempest, quiet their fears, and "bring them unto their desired haven." "Oh, that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!"*

The multitude, who had been desirous that Jesus should assume the government, and from whom he had withdrawn, sought after him again with a renewed ardour. They had travelled far on foot, and then they crossed the lake in search of him. At length they found him in the synagogue at Capernaum, and, after expressing their surprise at his removal to that place, which they could not account for, they received a solemn reproof for the low and carnal motives upon which they followed him. The miraculous entertainment he had afforded them raised their expectations of his possessing a temporal dominion, and they were still in hopes of exalting and enriching themselves by his service. A poor reason, indeed, for pretending an attachment to Jesus! Yet, we fear, a regard to secular advantages has been the ground of much of that religious zeal which has been admired in the world. But it is a mean and contemptible principle. He called upon them, therefore, to turn their attention from the care of the perishable body to that of the immortal soul, and to employ their utmost eagerness and diligence for the attainment of those blessings, which would remain for ever. He declared, also, that he

* Psal. cvii. 30, 31.

himself, as "the Son of man," had received a commission, from God the Father, freely to bestow this eternal happiness and glory.

They professed an earnest desire to do the will of God ; and therefore our Lord asserted the necessity of believing on the Saviour, as a duty indispensably requisite above all others, the grand injunction of the new dispensation, and the appointed method of acceptance with God. His words implied that he was the Christ whom they should receive. Yet many of them were unwilling to admit his claims, and insolently demanded his credentials, as if he had already exhibited none which deserved regard. He had performed various miracles in their neighbourhood, of which they must have had authentic information ; and their own eyes had seen unquestionable proofs of his divine mission : and still they presumed to ask, "What dost thou work?" Unbelief is always unreasonable ; it cavils at the plainest testimonies, and determines never to be satisfied. We need not, therefore, be surprised at the outcry for stronger evidence, as it is generally made by those whom no evidence will convince.

It was intimated to Jesus that his miracles were far inferior to those of Moses, who had fully demonstrated his sacred character and legation by supporting their ancestors in the wilderness with manna from heaven. He replied that the Lord God was then dispensing to them bread infinitely more excellent than that which Moses had been the means of communicating, and that this bread was no other than the very Person

who had descended from the highest heavens, for the purpose of giving life to a perishing world. The extraordinary and important declaration probably impressed the minds of some of his audience, and constrained them to cry out, though they comprehended not the full import of their own words, "Lord, evermore give us this bread!" There cannot be a more suitable petition for ourselves to offer up: only let us understand and feel its meaning. Who is not anxious to preserve life? What immense pains are taken to procure that sustenance which merely supports the body! And shall we not be solicitous to gain a happy existence beyond the grave? Are we told that God has graciously made provision for this very end in the Gospel of his Son? And shall we not, instead of proudly and petulantly quarrelling with it, seriously inquire into its nature, and the method in which the benefit may be conveyed? Such a disposition, surely, becomes our character and situation. Let us hear, then, the further instructions of Jesus on this most interesting subject.

He declared explicitly, and without reserve, that he himself is that spiritual food on which our everlasting salvation depends; that by faith alone the blessing is obtained; and that the believer, in a sincere application to him, shall be delivered from those carnal desires which never can be satisfied, and shall find his soul contented and delighted in him. Still he observed that many of those, who then saw him with their eyes, and had the best opportunity of examining

his pretensions, contemptuously rejected the gracious offer. How shall this be accounted for? The true reason is assigned by our Lord. In our fallen and depraved state, such is our natural blindness, pride, and love of the world, that we are all unwilling to accept the salvation provided, by submitting to Jesus, and fixing our whole reliance upon him. Yet, that the glorious plan of redemption may not be defeated by our folly and perverseness, God hath secured a people for himself by his own covenant: and these, under the strong influence of his Spirit, abandon their opposition to Jesus, and bow before him with an unreserved subjection, thankful to partake of mercy in the appointed way. We adore that power, which hath wrought effectually in all them that believe. While we admire the change, we confess and praise the free and sovereign grace of our God, which hath produced it.

But, lest this high and mysterious doctrine should be abused, or any humble penitents be discouraged, Jesus also declared his readiness to receive the applications of all who come, in all possible circumstances, and solemnly pledged his word that no objection whatever should prevail against them. This he confirmed by remarking that the final salvation of his people was the very end for which he had left the glory of heaven, and that it was also the grand object of his Father's counsels. On this ground he instructed them to expect from him the completion of their happiness in an everlasting state, and promised, again and again, that, though their bodies must go down to the

dust, the grave should not detain them for ever, but that his arm would rescue them from death at the last day. Will not these assurances suffice us? Jesus possesses all fulness of grace for the recovery of them that are lost. The invitation is sent to all, without exception: the offer is freely made to those who sincerely desire it; and all obstructions are removed but those which sinners themselves obstinately continue to throw in the way. What more do you wish for than a favourable acceptance? Why then do you remain at a distance from him, since he bids you to draw nigh, and engages to give you a cordial welcome? There is no decree which can exclude you from his mercy, if only you will submit to his proposals. His hand is stretched out to communicate his blessings; and his bowels yearn with compassion toward every poor supplicant who is humbled at his feet.

Jesus having spoken in high terms of his descent from heaven, and of the benefits to be derived from himself, the Jews, who were not acquainted with his divine extraction, and supposed him to be no more than the son of Joseph, his reputed father, began to cavil at his expressions. To silence their objections, and turn their attention to themselves, he replied to the following effect:—

“ Instead of indulging a captious disposition, seriously consider your own awful circumstances, and implore direction and assistance from above. For, such is the natural ignorance and perverseness of man in his fallen state, that he cannot be induced to seek or accept salvation in my name, but by the powerful ope-

ration of God upon his mind. Your own prophets have instructed you to ask and expect this very influence; and every one who has obtained it will acknowledge my claims, and yield me an unfeigned submission. In this way only my blessings are to be secured. Mistake me not, as if the Father would manifest himself in a visible manner: He speaks to you by him who is come from his immediate presence; and I, his faithful Witness, declare with the most solemn and repeated asseverations, that he, who places his whole affiance upon me, is received into the divine favour, and possesses a sure title to eternal happiness."

"I am, therefore, that bread, which alone can afford true sustenance to your souls. How far superior to the manna by which your ancestors were supported! That was the means of preserving their existence in this world only for a short season; whereas the spiritual food which I propose will effectually secure you from perishing for ever. I myself am that food, of which the manna was a faint and imperfect representation: I came down from the highest heavens to communicate everlasting life to all those, throughout the whole world, who by faith shall partake of the sacred provision. For this very purpose I have assumed a human body, which I shall shortly offer up as an expiatory sacrifice, to rescue sinners from deserved ruin, and procure for them the possession of endless felicity."

Declarations so strong, so new, and mysterious, excited various sentiments in the minds of the Jews, who, therefore, began to dispute with each other con-

cerning them. Through their carnal and perverse dispositions they could not comprehend how Jesus could "give them his flesh to eat." Probably most of them were disposed to deride the doctrine as altogether absurd. But he proceeded to confirm it by the most express and vehement assertions, without deigning to answer every cavil which a proud objector might bring.

"However you may scorn the warning, I solemnly assure you that you are totally destitute of real spiritual life, unless you be quickened by believing on the Son of man, as suffering and dying for you.* He

* It would be doing the utmost violence to language to explain our Lord's expressions in any other sense than as referring to his intended sacrifice of himself. If he be no more than a teacher of virtue, and if he save us only by his good instructions, with what propriety of speech could he talk of giving his flesh to eat, and his blood to drink? This figure, doubtless, must be understood as representing his death, and our salvation as resulting from it, agreeably to those other declarations of the Scriptures, which ascribe our redemption to his blood. Allowing the reference to his atonement, the whole appears consistent, and demands our most serious regard; but otherwise it must be thought strange and incongruous.

The Lord's Supper was not at this time instituted; and therefore, though many of the expressions may be properly accommodated to that sacrament, which is an emblematical representation of the flesh and blood of Christ given to us as our spiritual food and sustenance, yet we are not warranted in drawing any conclusions from the passage before us with respect to the efficacy of that ordinance. Those who communicate by faith do indeed eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ, and they are vitally united to him. But the bare participation of the outward elements proves not a believing application to the Saviour, nor does it necessarily implant or increase the divine principle of life in the soul.

surrenders up his body to the most violent tortures, and consents to shed his blood; and the benefits of this atonement will be communicated to you through faith. As the common food of your bodies must be received, that it may afford the necessary sustenance, so must you feast upon the sacrifice which my death will make, in order to derive from it true nourishment and vigour to your souls. The man who thus maintains an habitual regard to me, as his grand and sole support, "who eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood," possesses the principle of immortal life within him, and I engage to raise his very dust from the grave in a glorified state. He is furnished with an entertainment more delightful than the most sumptuous provisions can be to the senses. He is joined to me by a mysterious and inseparable union, which even resembles that of the eternal Father and the incarnate Son, and by virtue of which his soul shall be sustained and invigorated, through the constant communications of the Spirit. So far, then, does the heavenly manna surpass, in its excellent effects, that miraculous food which was granted to your progenitors in the wilderness. That imparted a benefit comparatively mean in its nature, and short in its continuance; but this, which is now exhibited, will secure life and happiness of the most exalted kind, and durable as eternity."

Such was the purport of our Lord's address to the Jews, and it is equally interesting to us as it was to them. Have we seriously considered it, and the important doctrines it involves? What impressions, then, are produced in our minds? Are we, like them, dis-

posed to murmur, because Jesus claims such an exalted dignity? Or are we inclined to enter into curious speculations, and dispute against the plain assertions of the Bible, because they contain some things which baffle our comprehension? How presumptuous is such a spirit! Rather let us consider our blindness and extreme depravity, and suspect our own conclusions. Let us fervently implore those divine influences which God hath promised, and which the wisest and best of men continually need. Our understandings must be illuminated, truly to discern the appointed method of salvation in the Gospel; our carnal prejudices and affections must be subdued, that our objections against it may be effectually silenced; and our wills must be brought under a holy bias, that we may yield a cordial compliance.

Jesus is exhibited as the heavenly manna, which alone can nourish our souls to life eternal: Have we made use of him in this character? He condescended to be made "partaker of flesh and blood," that, dying in our nature, he might expiate our guilt: Have we fixed our regard upon him as our atoning sacrifice? It is solemnly declared, that without a real participation of Christ by faith, we must remain in a state of spiritual death: Have we been sufficiently aware of the absolute necessity of believing? Is it not enough that we give a cool assent to this fact, that Jesus hath died for us; but we must place our whole reliance upon him, and expect pardon, peace, and everlasting glory, as obtained for us by his blood: Do we constantly maintain such a temper of mind towards him? Great and blessed are the effects

of this humble and cordial application to the Saviour : Can we testify of their reality and existence ? Do we daily feed on the sacred sustenance here provided for us, and find in it the most exquisite delight ? Are we sensible of any communion between Jesus and our own souls ? And do we derive from him refreshment when we are weary, strength when we faint, and comfort when we are oppressed with troubles ? If this be our case, we may rejoice in the confidence that he will bring us forth at the general resurrection with triumph and exceeding joy, and grant us a sure abode in his own glorious presence for evermore.

Such a free declaration of the mysteries of faith, and especially such a particular application of them to the consciences of the hearers, will generally excite offence ; nor should the ministers of Christ be surprised at that effect, when they observe the reception which their Master met with. Many, even of his professed friends and disciples, began to cavil at his doctrine as harsh and unintelligible. He perceived their inward dissatisfaction, and replied to the very objections which they were afraid to utter. He intimated that he should soon return to heaven, from whence he had come down ; and that his ascension, which might puzzle them as much as what he had asserted, would prove the justice of his claims. To prevent their abuse of the subject, he guarded them against a literal acceptance of his words, and directed them to the spiritual sense, in which alone they could be understood with profit. But he remarked, that, as he had been aware of their secret unbelief from the very first, he had in-

sisted on divine influences, as necessary to remove the opposition of their hearts against them.

From that time, many, who had long followed him, perceiving, probably, that their hypocrisy was detected, totally withdrew, and returned no more. Nay, such was the desertion, that it might seem as if the very twelve were staggered, and ready to depart. Jesus, therefore, called upon them to declare explicitly whether they would abide with him or no, that so their service might not appear to be constrained, but voluntary. The most distant proposal, however, of apostatizing from the Saviour, will ever strike the sincere believer with horror. Accordingly, Peter stood forth, as the mouth of the Apostles, maintaining their immoveable attachment to him, and steadfast dependence upon him for eternal life; rejecting, also, with fixed resolution, the thought of forsaking him, as big with misery and ruin. This was, indeed, a good confession. Yet, that they might still exercise a holy jealousy, and not be shaken in their minds by what would soon take place among themselves, he intimated that even in their small company, which he had selected for his own peculiar society, there was one person who possessed so malignant a disposition, as to resemble the devil himself. Ah! what terror, what distressing inquiries, must this excite among them!

Is it any objection, then, to the Christian church at the present day, that it contains many unsound members? Falsehearted professors are to be expected at all times; but, in general, some temptation or other will occur, which will manifest their insincerity. Fre-

quently they are offended by the plain dealing of their ministers ; and it is no wonder that they depart from those who suspect them of hypocrisy. How awful is their case ! “ It had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness.”* May the example awaken the attention of all who bear the Christian name ! Happy those who are preserved unshaken, in the midst of numerous apostates. We ask, then, of what kind is your attachment to Jesus ? “ Will ye also go away ? ” Are you, “ who seemed to be pillars, moved from your hope ? ” You must, indeed, be left to your own choice ; but we entreat you to form that choice deliberately, with a full view of all the consequences before you. If you depart from Christ, to whom can you betake yourselves ? Is there any other refuge ? Are “ the words of eternal life ” to be found any where besides ? We exhort you, then, that, whatever difficulties may arise, you would not “ draw back unto perdition,” but “ with purpose of heart cleave unto the Lord.”

* 2 Pet. ii. 21.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. XXI.

Jesus replied to the cavils of Pharisees—cautioned the people against them—tried and commended the faith of a woman of Canaan—wrought many cures—fed four thousand by a miracle—opposed by Pharisees and Sadducees—restored sight to a blind man at Bethsaida—declared his character, and foretold his passion, to his disciples, requiring them also to suffer with him.

THOUGH we are informed of many minute occurrences in the life of Jesus, yet many are concealed from us. We are not told whether he was present at the celebration of the passover, which succeeded the transactions recorded in the preceding section. But it is probable that, at that season of national concourse, various reports of Him, who engaged universal attention, were carried from Galilee to Jerusalem, and that these excited the envious displeasure of the public and most distinguished teachers of religion. It is certain, however, that many of that description, the Scribes and Pharisees, went down from the city, and, as it is likely, to Capernaum, though at a considerable distance, for the express purpose of collecting some

grounds of accusation, or of bringing him into discredit with the people.* These men, with all their pretences to sanctity, were the most violent opposers of the Saviour, and were evidently actuated by the basest motives in their conduct towards him. They discovered great zeal by taking so long a journey; but it was in a bad cause. Nor is it uncommon for those who resist the truth to be at immense pains and expense for the accomplishment of their purposes, and even to suppose that they are "doing God service," at the very time they are filled with enmity against him.

Persons so disposed will seldom be at a loss for objections. Something or other, in the most exemplary behaviour, will appear censurable to the envious and malicious eye. What cause of complaint, then, did these insidious adversaries find against the holy Jesus? They upbraided him with the contempt which his disciples showed for their traditions in eating without first washing their hands. How ridiculous and how palpable was their hypocrisy, who laid such stress on outward purifications, and perceived not their need of inward sanctity! Men are ever prone to depend on a strict observance of rites and ceremonies, even of their own invention, and to substitute them for "the power of godliness," or to imagine that these will compensate the neglect of the most express moral injunctions. Jesus, therefore, convicted them of their glaring inconsistency in preferring their superstitious institutions to the absolute precepts of God. He produced one instance, in which they virtually abrogated the fifth

* Matt. xv. 1—20. Mark vii. 1—23.

commandment ; for they excused those, who, through a false pretext of piety, and of devoting their substance to God, refused to relieve their aged parents in distress. They accounted it sufficient to say, “ We have bound ourselves by a vow to give our money to the treasury, or some sacred use, and are therefore freed from the obligation of contributing to the support of our father or our mother.”

It is indispensably required that we “ learn first to show piety at home, and to requite our parents ; for that is good and acceptable before God.”* We cannot, therefore, credit their professions of religion, who violate so plain and strict an injunction ; nor can any sacrifices to God, however costly, be accepted in lieu of this important duty. Yet in many such ways did these corrupt teachers flatter their deluded followers. Our Lord observed that their vile dissimulation was accurately described by one of their own prophets. For, like those of old, they “ drew near to God with their mouth, and with their lips did honour him, but removed their heart far from him.”† And do none of modern times resemble them ? Have we not those, who with a rigorous exactness insist on the particular distinctions of their own party, and institutions of merely human authority, while they allow themselves to transgress, in various instances, the eternal rules of righteousness, and suppose that their ceremonial scrupulosity or religious zeal will be a sufficient vindication of their conduct ? Ah ! what will avail the most specious pretences to devotion before that God, who “ desireth

* 1 Tim. v. 4.

† Isa. xxix. 13.

truth in the inward parts?" "In vain do we worship him," if we offer him only the service of the lips, or attempt to substitute any observances instead of that holy obedience which he requires.

This was a proper occasion (and Jesus therefore embraced it) to warn the people not to be misled by such ignorant expounders of the law, and to show them that the depravity of the heart is the grand source of impurity, which renders us defiled in the sight of God. The Pharisees, offended with his plain reproofs, and confounded in their designs, had gone away in disgust. On that account the disciples in private expressed their fears for the consequence: but he bade them not to be disturbed by those perverse opposers of the truth, inasmuch as both they, and their infatuated followers, would soon be overwhelmed with final and remediless destruction.

It is an awful case when those who know not the way to heaven undertake to be public instructors. How fatal the effects to themselves and others! The deceived and the deceiver, however they may flatter and be flattered, shall perish together. Let us not, therefore, blindly and implicitly submit to the opinions and dictates of men, though they may bear a respectable character, or even fill the highest stations in the church; but let us form our judgment, not from human decisions, but from "the law and the testimony," since, whoever may be our teachers, we must answer for ourselves before the bar of God.

The declarations of our Lord were not well understood even by his own disciples. Having reproved

them, therefore, in secret, for their dulness of comprehension, he affirmed in plainer terms that the heart is the seat and source of all moral pollution, that the food which is received for the proper nourishment of the body brings no defilement upon the soul, but that the man is rendered unclean and offensive before God only in consequence of his inward depravity, and that which proceeds from it. This is a doctrine which calls for deep humiliation and constant circumspection. It is easy to eat with clean hands, but would that purge the conscience? Ah! "Who can say, I have made my heart clean; I am pure from my sin?"* According to the description which Jesus here gave, our fallen nature is so fruitful of evil, that it puts forth, as its common produce, all manner of impurity. Hence we are taught to account for the various kinds of iniquity in the world. Corrupt reasonings, irregular desires, sensual affections, lewdness, violence, dishonesty, avarice, malevolence, treachery, envy, profaneness, pride, and folly, have but one and the same origin: "they come from within." What then shall we think of the fountain which sends forth such filthy streams? How suitable is the confession of Job, "Behold, I am vile!" How exactly adapted to our case is that gracious promise of the new covenant, "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean:—a new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you."†

Jesus, withdrawing from the observation of his malicious enemies, went into the neighbourhood of Tyre

* Prov. xx. 9.

† Ezek. xxxvi. 25, 26.

and Sidon, which was a remote part of the land.* Here, for proper reasons doubtless, he sought to conceal himself, but found it impracticable. He was soon discovered, and applied to for relief; but his visit is distinguished only by one little occurrence, which exhibits a character very opposite to that we have seen in the Pharisees. A poor distressed woman, not "of the stock of Israel," but descended probably from the ancient Canaanites, is here produced as a surprising instance of the rich grace of God: and it is likely too that her case was intended to intimate that mercy would shortly appear for the outcasts of the Gentiles. She had heard of the wonderful works of Jesus, from which, it should seem, she believed him to be the very Saviour whom the Jews were taught to expect from the family of David. Under this conviction she had recourse to him, in behalf of her beloved daughter, who was grievously afflicted with a demoniacal possession. She implored his kind interposition for her child, and urged her request with peculiar ardour.

The case was truly pitiable: but the behaviour of Jesus on this occasion was somewhat singular. We have hitherto observed him attentive to every cry of distress, and ready to render his assistance wherever it was solicited. But now he appeared totally regardless of the importunate supplicant, and returned no answer to her prayer. After some time, the disciples interceded for her, perhaps through real compassion, or being wearied with her incessant cries. Yet even this application seemed to meet with an absolute refusal

* Matt. xv. 21—29. Mark vii. 24, &c.

because the immediate objects of his commission were "the lost sheep of the house of Israel," and not "sinners of the Gentiles." What, then, could be alleged in her behalf? She determined not to give up her petition, but rather to press it with greater earnestness, though she had nothing to plead but her misery. She cast herself at his feet, in adoration of his power and grace, exclaiming, with evident expressions of inward anguish, and yet of entire reliance upon him, "Lord, help me." Still the Saviour appeared deaf to her entreaties, and even to reject her with contempt; for he replied, that the Jews as children of the family, had a prior claim to his regard, and that it would be improper to cast their bread to "the dogs;" such being the low estimation in which the Gentiles were held.

From this severe repulse we might have considered her case as desperate; but she, with unshaken dependence, "against hope believed in hope." Her difficulties increased her ardour, so that she turned the very objections urged against her into an argument in her own favour. Allowing the justness of our Lord's allusion, and that she deserved to be treated no otherwise than the dogs, she begged permission to gather some crumbs under the Master's table, which the children would not use; intimating that, as his grace was so large, like the provisions of a rich entertainment, some small portion of it might be extended to her, worthless as she was, without injury to his peculiar people.

We might possibly accuse the Saviour of acting with rigorous cruelty towards this poor woman; but the close of the narrative unfolds the reasons of his conduct.

Though for some time he appeared unrelenting and inexorable, yet at length his compassion broke forth : and then it was found that he had withheld from her the desired mercy only that he might exercise her faith, for its further increase, and exhibit it to public view for the instruction and encouragement of others. When, therefore, she had given full proof of her unfeigned humility, and firm reliance upon him, he no longer frowned, but granted her petition in the most gracious manner : he declared his warmest approbation of her principles, and assured her of the perfect and instantaneous recovery of her daughter.

What, then, do we learn from this incident ? We hear of Jesus ; but do we believe him to be “ the Son of David,” the “ Lord,” who can “ have mercy on us ?” Have we no request to make, no blessing to implore from him ? Let us pray with importunity, and take no denial. Perhaps he may deal with us as he did with the woman of Canaan, by seeming to disregard our distress, and to reject our suit with disdain. But let not this apparent neglect deter us : though repulsed again and again, let us renew our application with fresh ardour, and doubt not a happy issue. He may require us to wait long for the very mercy which he means to bestow. In the mean time, we are to manifest our deep contrition, and the strength of our confidence in his power, faithfulness, and love. Nay, though our guilt and depravity may be urged against us, as rendering us unsuitable objects for the Saviour’s notice, we may solicit him the more earnestly to glorify himself in our deliverance. But, ah ! how much

impatience do we discover ! How hardly do we bear the least delay ! How soon do we give up our expectation in despondency, as if “the mercy of God were clean gone for ever, and his promise had failed for evermore !” How wretched, then, would be our condition, if he should treat us according to our own unbelieving apprehensions !

Jesus, having left the neighbourhood of Tyre and Sidon, came near to the sea of Galilee, where he ascended a mountain, probably for the purpose of instructing the multitudes who followed him. Here the case of one deprived entirely of his hearing, and almost of his speech, was submitted to him ; nor was his help implored in vain. Devoutly looking up in prayer, and then pronouncing the word with peculiar majesty, he instantly restored the obstructed faculties to their proper functions. That he might avoid ostentation, or that he might not provoke the malice of his enemies, he desired the matter to be concealed from public notice ; but the cure appeared so wonderful, that it was soon proclaimed abroad, and all expressed their admiration of his character, saying, “ He hath done all things well.”

Nor was this the only miracle which he performed there. Many other infirm and diseased persons were brought and cast at his feet, who excited his pity, and experienced his power to heal.* These astonishing events could not but make a deep impression on the minds of the people, who therefore “ glorified the God of Israel” for his gracious interposition. And shall

* Matt. xv. 30, &c. Mark viii. 1—10.

we hear of them with a careless indifference? Shall we not be induced, from such proofs of the strength and mercy of our Redeemer, to trust, and love, and praise, and serve him? Shall we not perceive herein the performance of ancient promises, and bless God, who "hath remembered his holy covenant, and raised up an horn of salvation for us?"

The dignity of Jesus was displayed in other instances. Again he put forth his creative power, as on a former occasion, to supply the necessities of those who attended his ministry. Moved with compassion for the people, who had continued with him three days together, and were then quite destitute of food, and many of them at a distance from their own homes, he furnished a table for them in the open fields. He directed his disciples to impart to them their own provisions. These were seven loaves and a few small fishes; but, poor as the stock was, it was so increased in the distribution, that four thousand persons, besides women and children, were fed and satisfied. The remains of this miraculous feast, as of the former, exceeded the original store, seven baskets of fragments being gathered up. He has afforded us sufficient encouragement, surely, to depend upon him for our daily bread. Only let us follow him in the way of duty, and he will not suffer us to "want any good thing." He "giveth food to all flesh;" nay, "the earth is his, and the fulness thereof;" so that he can, without difficulty, supply all our need. He has instructed us also, we perceive, to be frugal in the midst of plenty, and not to lavish, by an useless profusion, what his bounty bestows. In every

case it is proper to "gather up the fragments, that nothing be lost."

Having dismissed the multitude, he crossed the sea to the coasts of Magdala. Here a fresh attack was made upon him by a company of Pharisees and Sadducees united, who wished to insnare him.* These men were as repugnant to each other in their principles as possible, the former being superstitious in the extreme, the latter perfectly licentious; but they came together to tempt Jesus. We see that persons of opposite tempers, of different sentiments, and of adverse parties, who cordially hate one another, can lay aside their animosities for a season, and forget their mutual malevolence, that they may join their strength and interest in acting against Christ.† These subtle antagonists, like modern infidels, objected to the sufficiency of his evidence, and demanded of him another sort of attestation than what he had yet given. They desired "a sign from heaven," intending, probably, some splendid appearance in the skies. But is it not the height of pride and insolence for sinners to prescribe unto God what measures of conduct he should pursue, what kind of a revelation he should afford them, or by what particular testimonies it should be confirmed? Men presumptuously despise and reject the plain and incontestable proofs by which he has evinced the truth of his Gospel, and arrogantly call for those which he has wisely denied, and which would be ineffectual to convince them.

* Matt. xvi. 1—12. Mark viii 11—21.

Many discover an acute discernment in their attention to worldly things, who betray the grossest ignorance and stupor in spiritual concerns. They will also transact their secular affairs with confidence, where they have nothing to depend on but mere conjecture, and yet hazard their eternal salvation while they are petulantly objecting to the infallible credentials of the holy Scriptures. Such was the case of those captious disputants who attacked the Saviour : and on this ground he reprov'd their inconsistency in forming an accurate judgment of the weather, and obstinately refusing to "discern the signs of the times." He then declared, with deep distress for their awful state, that no such evidence as they desired would be granted, except it were his own resurrection on the third day ; and then he left them to themselves, departing to the opposite side of the lake. Let their case stand as a solemn admonition to those who study to invalidate revelation by their subtle arguments. Alas ! while you are debating, Jesus may entirely withdraw himself from you, and give you up to corrupt reasonings, and confirmed obduracy of heart.

When they had crossed the sea, the disciples of Jesus were distressed to find that they had nearly exhausted their whole stock of provisions. Their Master, to turn off their attention to a more profitable subject, cautioned them to "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees," intending thereby to guard them against the dangerous opinions of those false teachers, whom he had lately combated. But they were so

anxious about their bodily sustenance, that they considered him only as directing them what bread they were to avoid. He reproved them, therefore, very sharply, for their dulness of comprehension in spiritual things, and for their distrusting fears of wanting food to eat, after having twice seen, as they had done, thousands supported by a miracle. Do not most of our own painful apprehensions arise from our ignorance and unbelief, and from a forgetfulness of the Lord's gracious interpositions in our favour? Oh! what shame and confusion belong to us, because we have profited no more by our past experience!

Jesus then declared explicitly that he meant to guard them against those corrupt doctrines of his opposers, which might be compared to leaven. How insinuating, how infectious, is error! How soon it spreads its influence, though often imperceptibly! Are we aware of the dangerous consequence of admitting it? Or do we foolishly imagine that all opinions are equally safe? Are there no fatal mistakes, in our own days, of which we should be suspicious? Yes, there never was a time when such a caution was more necessary. Take heed, then, that ye be not "carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive."*

Jesus came to Bethsaida, where he was requested to extend his compassion to a blind man.† He readily consented; and yet he chose not to perform the miracle within the confines of the town, nor would he suffer the person to return thither, to publish his case;

* Eph. iv. 14.

† Mark viii. 22—26.

which might be intended as a mark of his displeasure against the unbelieving inhabitants. Many of the astonishing effects of his power and grace at this time also are purposely concealed from the observation of sinners, who would be disposed to treat them with contempt and derision. But the day is approaching when all his wonderful works, and the excellency of his character, shall be made known to the assembled universe, to the unspeakable joy of his faithful people, and the confusion of his enemies.

When he had withdrawn the man to a little distance from the city, he restored his sight, though in a gradual manner. At the first touch of the Saviour, some faint glimmerings of light were conveyed to the darkened eyes, so that things were perceived very obscurely, and men appeared "as trees, walking." But, upon the second touch, every object was seen distinctly. In each one of his miracles, Jesus exhibited his divine perfections : but he did not confine himself to a particular mode of operation. In some instances, we apprehend, the full blaze of day was suddenly poured in upon the blind ; but here was a regular advance from one degree of clearness to another. It is the same in spiritual concerns. He alone "giveth light and understanding to the simple ;" but the methods of his grace are different in different persons. We must not dictate to him, nor set up the case of any Christian as a standard to which that of all others must be accommodated. Some are instantaneously "called out of darkness into marvellous light;" whilst many attain, by a slow progress, to the knowledge of the truth. The least measure of divine

illumination is an earnest for good. It is like the twilight of the morning, which announces the rising of the sun. Though much obscurity, therefore may attend your present views, be encouraged to wait upon the Saviour, in hope of receiving a more distant perception. “The path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.”*

Jesus now changed his situation, and betook himself to Cesarea-Philippi, in the northern extremity of Judea.† In that neighbourhood, being retired with his disciples, he inquired of them what were the general sentiments of men concerning him. When informed that he was thought to be either John the Baptist, or some one of the ancient prophets, who was risen from the dead, he urged them to declare their own opinion of his character. To this there could be no other answer from his own attendants than what Peter immediately returned in the name of the rest, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” The confession was explicit, decided, and ingenious; and Jesus pronounced the favoured Apostle who made it peculiarly blessed, as having received his knowledge, not by his natural abilities, or any human aid, but by divine communication. Then, having asserted the infallible security of his church against all assaults of the power of darkness, he promised to use Peter as a principal instrument in building that sacred edifice, and settling the concerns of his government. This amounted to a clear and explicit avowal that he was indeed the

* Prov. iv. 18.

† Matt. xvi. 13, &c. Mark viii. 27. &c. ix. 1. Luke ix. 18—27.

Saviour, possessed of supreme authority ; but it passed only in private ; and, from motives of prudence, he charged them not to divulge the matter till the proper season.

What are our conclusions respecting the extraordinary Character before us ? Do we know him to be the Christ ? Let us not presume on our own sagacity, the advantages of education, or any assistance from men, but implore the divine influence upon our minds, " that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto us the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him."* Or are we grounded on the only sure foundation, " the Rock," which cannot be moved ? Then let us exult in our high privileges ; and, trusting to the promise, let us defy the fiercest attacks of our most malicious enemies.

Jesus, having expressly acknowledged his real character, began to speak to his disciples with less reserve concerning himself, and the particular means by which he should accomplish redemption for his people. He, therefore, plainly foretold his approaching sufferings, death, and resurrection. But such a Saviour they had not looked for ; and the declaration staggered their faith. Peter, in particular, with his usual forwardness, dared to object to the scheme, as unworthy of his Master, and to dissuade him from it. This brought upon him a sharp rebuke, for he had evidently betrayed very low and carnal conceptions of the kingdom of Christ, and appeared even as an accomplice of Satan, in opposing his Lord's designs. Let us seek for proper

* Eph. i. 17.

views of the way of salvation. If Peter was acting a diabolical part, when he tempted Jesus to relinquish the end for which he came into the world, let us be well established in this fundamental article of our creed, that "we have redemption through his blood," and that "he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself."*

From this circumstance Jesus was led to address, not his disciples only, but the multitude at large, on the necessity of being willing to suffer with him. Let us attend to his solemn declarations; for they concern ourselves. Do we profess a regard to him? He exhorts us to enter upon a strict course of self-denial, and to submit to extreme difficulties, even to martyrdom itself, in his cause. We must testify a grateful sense of his love, and a pure desire to promote his glory, by sacrificing ease, interest, reputation, and life itself, when we are required, for his sake. An inordinate attachment to present enjoyments will ruin us for ever: but a cheerful renunciation of every thing dear and valuable upon earth, in the service of Christ, will be recompensed with eternal blessedness hereafter.

Are any deterred, by such considerations, from following the Saviour? Then make your choice, and, if you please, prefer the world to him. Secure its best delights, and if it be possible, possess the whole of its pomps, its dominion, or its pleasures: what will you have gained? Can you estimate your profit, when you shall be rejected of God, and your souls lost, beyond the power of recovery, for ever? Is there any equivalent to be offered, by which you could purchase a re-

* Eph. i. 7. Heb. ix, 26.

lease from hell, or even a mitigation of its torments? And are your immortal spirits in danger of perishing? Yes: "the Judge standeth before the door;"—"the Son of man shall come," with all the glory of his divine majesty, and with the whole retinue of heaven; and you must appear at his tribunal, to receive "according to your works." What, then, have you to look for at his hands, if you have opposed his cause, or, through the base principle of fear or shame, have declined the profession of his Gospel, or the society of his people? Think you that he will then own you, and number you among his saints? No: he will separate you from the company of those to whom you durst not avow an attachment upon earth; he will reject you with abhorrence, and consign you to a state of unutterable confusion, torment, and despair.

Such was the purport of our Lord's solemn admonitions; and in the same manner should sinners of the present day be warned. Perhaps the objection might be raised, If he were indeed of that exalted dignity which he represented, why did not his glory immediately appear? And it might be with a view to obviate the difficulty that he assured the persons around him that some of them should not die till they had seen a grand exhibition of his majesty, which might be considered as the commencement of his government. Some have supposed that this referred to his transfiguration, which soon followed: but it has more generally been explained of that remarkable display of his power which took place in the destruction of Jerusalem, to the overthrow of his enemies, and the esta-

blishment of his church. That event he frequently described as his coming; and it was an awful emblem of his future and more illustrious advent for the final judgment of the world.

His predictions have been in part fulfilled; and in due time, when his righteous purposes are effected, they will all have their full completion. He will be revealed in his glory, as he hath told us; "and every eye shall see him." How shall we stand before him? What is our hope and expectation? Does the prospect of his manifestation fill us with delight? For so it ought to do, if we be indeed partakers of his salvation. It is the privilege of his faithful people to look and long for his appearing, crying "Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly." But such as remain at enmity against him have abundant cause to dread "the day of the Lord." In vain will they call upon the rocks and mountains to cover them, and hide them from his face. They must be arraigned at his bar; and their everlasting doom shall be pronounced from his mouth.—May we find mercy of the Lord in that day, and enter with him into his kingdom for ever! Amen.

J E S U S C H R I S T.

SECT. XXII.

Jesus was transfigured, and declared to be the Son of God—expelled an evil spirit, which his Apostles could not—warned them of approaching sufferings—paid the sacred tribute by a miracle—suggested solemn cautions against ambition, offences, contempt of any the weakest believers, severity and revenge towards an offending brother.

THE Lord Jesus Christ appeared upon earth in a state of profound humiliation, the brightness of his original glory being obscured by the infirmities of humanity, and the external meanness of his condition. His example, indeed, his preaching and his miracles, proved him to be not only superior to the children of men, but “the Lord from heaven.” There were also certain occasions, on which his true dignity was displayed in a very signal manner. The following instance is of that kind; and it seems to have been intended, not for vain parade, but for important purposes to himself and others.

About a week after the solemn address to his disciples, which was last mentioned, he retired to a high mountain (supposed by some to be Mount Tabor),

for the purposes of secret devotion.* He selected three out of the twelve, Peter, James, and John, his favoured attendants, that they might be witnesses of a grand exhibition of his glory, as they soon afterwards were of his distressing agony in the garden of Gethsemane. In their presence, as he offered up his fervent supplications, he assumed a most magnificent appearance, putting off, for a season, "the form of a servant and the likeness of men," and discovering his proper character, while he shone with the lustre of divine majesty. His countenance became bright and dazzling, as the sun in the firmament; and such a splendour covered his whole body, that the rays, as it were, darted through his garments, which also were luminous and sparkling as the light itself. Two eminent persons, likewise, who had been honoured in his service upon earth, Moses and Elijah, then attended him from the world of spirits, in a glittering resplendent form, and conversed with him on the grand design of his incarnation, the sacrifice which he was shortly to make for the sins of mankind, by his crucifixion at Jerusalem.

A sight so wonderful might well overwhelm the three Apostles. At first they had fallen asleep through fatigue; but being awakened, probably by the exceeding brightness of the appearance, they beheld the astonishing spectacle, and heard the conclusion of the conference. Peter, in particular, experienced so rapturous a surprise upon the occasion, that he exclaimed, "Master, it is good for us to be here," and proposed to erect tabernacles for the accommodation of their Lord and

* Matt. xvii. 1--13. Mark ix. 2--13. Luke ix. 28--36.

his two illustrious attendants, as if he could have spent his life upon the mount, amidst such transcendent glory, and with such exalted company. But he scarcely understood the meaning of his own words.

This was not the whole. Immediately a shining cloud, as a token of the divine Presence, perhaps resembling the ancient Shechinah, overshadowed them, and impressed them with solemn awe ; while a voice from heaven proclaimed Jesus to be the Son of the eternal Father, and the object of his supreme complacency, and required an earnest regard and an unfeigned submission to him. Here, then, was a clear revelation and a near approach of the Deity. But was not the grand exhibition too much for human powers to sustain ? Alas ! such is our state of infirmity, and such the effect of guilt upon the conscience, that the most advanced saints in this world would feel some degree of terror if God were to manifest himself to them in his glorious majesty, though sweetly tempered with grace and mercy. If our eyes should behold the Lord of hosts, we could not but adopt the language of Job, “ I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes ; ”* we could not help exclaiming, like the Prophet, “ Wo is me ! for I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips : ” † or we should say, as Peter, “ Depart from me ; for I am a sinful man, O Lord. ” ‡ So these three distinguished disciples “ fell on their face, and were sore afraid. ” But Jesus, who undertakes to introduce his people into the presence of God, and to give them confidence before him, immediately interposed for their support and com-

* Job xlii. 6.

† Isa. vi. 5.

‡ Luke v. 8.

fort. He put his hands on them, and encouraged them to arise, and lay aside their fears.

The transfiguration was ended; the heavenly visitants disappeared; and Jesus, being left alone with his Apostles, charged them not to divulge what they had seen, still after his resurrection. Perhaps their account of it would not have been credited before that event, and it might have produced some dangerous consequences. It should seem that they expected Elijah's continuance among them, and were surprised at his being withdrawn; for it was commonly supposed, from Malachi's prediction, that he would return to dwell on the earth, to effect a general reformation, and thus prepare the way for the kingdom of Messiah.* But Jesus taught them that the prophecy had been already fulfilled in its spirit; John the Baptist, who resembled Elijah in his zeal and habits of austerity, had appeared for those purposes, which were predicted.

And what impression does the narration of this singular vision make upon our minds? It is circumstantially related, and confidently attested, not only by three Evangelists, but by one of those who were eye-witnesses of it. St. Peter produces it as a strong proof that they had not "followed cunningly-devised fables." but that Jesus was indeed what they had heard him declared to be by a voice from heaven, "the Son of God."† And are we receiving him as the Beloved of the Father? Do we admire, praise, and trust him? Are we also, as the Father, "well pleased" in him? Do we

* Mal. iv. 5, 6.

† 2 Pet. i. 16—18. See also 1 John i. 1—3.

feel a holy complacency and delight in his mediation, as a sufficient ground of hope and confidence towards God? Do we hear him as our teacher to instruct, our Saviour to comfort, and our Lord to command us? Then by faith we behold an unspeakable glory in him, though not that outward lustre, so dazzling to the bodily sight, upon the mount. Then we shall not only consider him as "the man Christ Jesus," but believe that the splendour of the divine Majesty resides in him, and we shall devoutly worship him as "our Lord and our God."

It is probable that the transfiguration was intended to animate and strengthen Jesus himself, who in his human nature might be ready to faint under the apprehension of his approaching sufferings, as well as to prevent his chosen companions from being staggered by the depth of his humiliation. They were, therefore, the better prepared to attend him in the garden of Gethsemane, and to stand by his cross on Mount Calvary. They beheld a token of his future glory, an emblem of that transcendent brightness which he should possess upon his return to heaven : and we consider it, also, as in some sort a representation of that magnificent and awful appearance, when, "being in the form of God," he shall come again "to judge the quick and dead," accompanied with a grand retinue, not merely Moses and Elijah, but "ten thousand of his saints." The prospect should cheer and revive your hearts, if indeed you are his faithful disciples. You shall be witnesses and partakers of his triumphant exaltation : "when Christ, who is our life, shall appear,

then shall ye also appear with him in glory.”* You likewise shall be transfigured, “ You shall be like him, for you shall see him as he is,”† and “ shall shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of your Father.”‡ Then it may be said in the highest sense, “ Lord, it is good for us to be here.” From that holy mount you will never be called down: and the glory, which is there to be revealed, “ fadeth not away.”

When Jesus returned to his other disciples, whom he had left behind, he found them engaged in disputation with the Scribes, who, probably, were endeavouring to subvert their faith.§ Upon his appearance, the vast multitudes of people who surrounded them ran with eager joy to express their respect. But they were struck with amazement; and, though we are not acquainted with the cause, it is possible that this effect might be produced by some remaining lustre which they observed in his countenance; for thus the face of Moses shone when he descended from Sinai.

Amongst the great numbers who flocked around him, one person in particular, under extreme anguish, solicited his aid. He brought his son, his only child, who, instead of being a comfort to him, was a spectacle of horror, afflicted with lunacy, convulsed with fits, and tortured in various ways through the possession of an evil spirit. The father, representing the case, kneeled as an humble supplicant at the feet of Jesus, and cried, “ Lord, have mercy on my son:—if thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us.” In this

* Col. iii. 4. † 1 John iii. 2. ‡ Matt. xiii. 43.

§ Matt. xvii. 14, &c. Mark ix. 14—33. Luke ix. 37—45.

very application the man discovered some degree of dependence ; but doubt and hesitation seemed to be mixed with it : and perhaps his principles were shaken by the opposition of the Scribes, and by the failure of the disciples, who had tried in vain to effect the cure. Jesus, therefore, required a more decided testimony of his faith, and observed that no deliverances were too great to be expected in an humble reliance upon him. The poor petitioner, being instantly convicted of his weakness, exclaimed, with evident marks of distress, " Lord, I believe ; help thou mine unbelief." The confession was accepted, and the prayer granted. The Saviour did not even upbraid him with his distrust, but proceeded to perform his request. He rebuked and expelled the devil, who seemed unwilling to relinquish his hold, and, even in the act of departing, grievously tormented the unhappy patient. After suffering some violent agonies, the son was restored in perfect health to his rejoicing parent.

You also, who now come unto Jesus, should disclose the troubles of your mind, and " pour out your heart before him : " in every instance, it will be proper for you to cry, " Lord, have mercy on us." But beware of entertaining any fears or suspicions, which are dishonourable to his character. No question ought to be made, concerning his ability, or his disposition, to help. " Canst thou believe ? " is the grand inquiry : for his blessings are communicated only to them who confide in him. Difficulties, perhaps, arise, which stagger you, and fill you with misgivings. Confess and lament this weakness before him, praying that he may pardon and

remove it, and not withhold his favour, through displeasure at the sin. "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief." Nor should you entreat him for yourselves alone, but for your friend, or your child in distress. In all circumstances, he can extend the relief which you want.

The disciples, as we have intimated, in vain attempted to expel the demon: and at this they expressed their wonder, when they had retired with their Master. They had wrought many miraculous cures before, and, perhaps, for that very reason, were too self-sufficient, or had forgot their entire dependence upon him for all their success. At least in this instance there was a failure of their faith; and, accordingly, he taught them, that it was only by maintaining a constant, though feeble and doubting, reliance upon him, they could perform the most astonishing operations. He further observed, that it was necessary to implore divine assistance, especially on solemn occasions and in great difficulties, by a more than ordinary measure of devotion and humiliation.

We are not called to the same high office, or invested with the same powers, as the Apostles. But we have all, in our respective places, continual need of God's strengthening and supporting hand. In the view of our several duties and trials, we may see reason to cry out, "Who is sufficient for these things?" Perhaps our good endeavours have miscarried because of our unbelief. With what temper of mind have we set ourselves to combat our spiritual enemies? Shall we wonder that we have been defeated, or that our cor-

ruptions still retain their ascendancy, notwithstanding our opposition? For is it not true here, also, that the victory we seek cannot be obtained "but by prayer and fasting?"

From the mount of transfiguration Jesus passed through different parts of Galilee. There he sought opportunities of privacy, that he might open to his disciples, more fully than he had done before, his approaching sufferings, death, and resurrection. The subject had been repeatedly mentioned, but they were dull of apprehension, and unwilling to admit it. They still looked for temporal dominion, and therefore could not bear to hear of his losing his life in an ignominious and violent manner. They were distressed and confounded, and yet afraid to disclose their difficulties. He, however, enduring with much indulgence their ignorance, ambition, and unbelief, continued to suggest his cautions, that he might gradually correct their mistakes. The cross of Christ has ever been matter of offence, and is so in our own day. This humbling scheme is what a proud and carnal mind cannot relish; and therefore it is accounted "foolishness." We are infinitely indebted to the mercy of God, who has rectified our notions and subdued our prejudices, if we are brought to admire it, to trust and rejoice in it. For after all the vain cavils of presumptuous men, it is "the power of God and the wisdom of God." But you, who are averse to this method of salvation, should consider that it is not for you to prescribe unto God. Submit implicitly to his gracious appointment, nor dare to quarrel with his terms. Beg of him to pardon your

perverseness, and give you more clearly to comprehend what may for the present appear obscure or inconsistent.

When Jesus came to Capernaum, it was inquired by the collectors whether he did not usually pay the tribute ; and his conduct upon that occasion was narrowly watched. Jesus discussed the subject in private with his Apostle Peter. He argued that he, as the Son of God, might plead a peculiar exemption from bearing the expense of supporting his Father's house (for the levy was probably that for the service of the temple), and that this should be laid upon strangers rather than upon him. But, to avoid offence, and to guard against a dangerous abuse of his example, he agreed to discharge the claim. But whence was the money to be furnished ? According to his directions, Peter cast a hook into the sea, and a fish, bearing in its mouth a silver coin to the full amount of the tribute, presented itself as an easy prey, at the very time and place in which it was wanted. This extraordinary method of payment displayed his power and condescension : his condescension, in submitting to such a state of extreme poverty, though he was Lord of all, that he could not without a miracle produce the very small sum sufficient to answer the demand ; and his power, inasmuch as all creatures were compelled to yield obedience to him, in whatever way they were required.

Let us not then complain of our contracted circumstances, while we contemplate Jesus in so mean a condition ; nor let us hesitate to trust ourselves under his care, when we see how easy it is for him to procure

money for necessary uses. He has taught us to contribute cheerfully, in our respective stations, whatever may be needful for the support of religion and civil government. "Render, therefore, to all their dues; tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom."* Withhold not from any their just or reasonable demands. If you profess to be followers of Jesus, you will feel the force of his motive, and study to give no offence. The fear of increasing the prejudices of the world against the Gospel will make you circumspect in this as well as in other instances of your conduct.

Our Lord, having called the twelve around him, in the house where he was retired, addressed them with all the affection of a father, instructing, warning, and reproofing them, as might be most expedient, according to their circumstances.† He had overheard them debating upon the road, concerning the right of precedence in his kingdom; for, still expecting a temporal dominion, and being too much under the influence of an ambitious spirit, they were all eager to obtain the highest places of preferment. But, when he had inquired the subject of their dispute, and they seemed ashamed to avow it, he spoke to their secret thoughts, and suggested, that, to be truly honourable in his account, they must possess other dispositions, and excel in humility. At length they introduced the matter openly, finding that it was not concealed, and asked plainly, "Who is the greatest?" To this he replied,

* Rom. xiii. 7.

† Matt. xviii. 1, &c. Mark ix. 33, &c. Luke ix. 46--48

while he took an infant in his arms, that, except they were converted to God, and rendered meek, teachable, and free from designs of guile and aspiring views like little children, they would not only attain no exaltation, but have no share at all in his kingdom; and that the person, who discovered most of an unfeigned lowliness of mind, stood the highest in his favour. And are we duly sensible of the spiritual nature of our religion? Are we not aiming at worldly grandeur and pre-eminence, instead of attending to the frame of our souls? What have we known of real conversion of heart? Is not the very term treated with profane ridicule, as if the mention of it proved a man a visionary and an enthusiast? But, surely, if conversion were so absolutely necessary in our Lord's time, it cannot now be dispensed with, however the idea may be scorned among us. Where shall we look for Christian humility? Do all, who pretend to be the disciples of Jesus, bear evident marks of a child-like simplicity, submission, and dependence? Or, rather, is not such a disposition derided as despicable meanness? How strange that those should retain the name of Christianity, who are ashamed of its peculiar excellencies and most essential attributes! Do we judge of our growth in grace by the criterion here laid down? Do we become more and more abased in ourselves? Have we a deeper sense of the malignity of sin, and of our extreme depravity? Do we learn to trust more unreservedly to the help of God, and daily to maintain faith in the Redeemer, more firmly, for every blessing? Thus only shall we prove our

advancement in the divine life, and our progress towards heaven.

Jesus, having mentioned one distinguishing part in the character of his people, proceeded to show what a tender regard should be paid to them. He declared, that whatever favour was done unto any of them, though it were one as feeble as the infant in his arms, he would consider it as done unto himself; but that a contempt of them, or a deliberate purpose to turn them out of the way, or interrupt them in their course, would be followed by a punishment infinitely more tremendous than any temporal destruction. Alas! how many such stumbling-blocks are laid before us, as not only obstruct the weak, but prove fatal to the souls of thousands? So circumstanced, indeed, as we now are, these things are to be expected: by inevitable consequence they will occur. But how provoking to God! how terrible the effects! "Wo unto the world, because of offences! Wo to that man by whom the offence cometh!"

Would you avoid the awful denunciation? Then beware, lest there be something in your temper and conduct which may be the means of seducing others, or prejudicing their minds against the truth of God. Attend to what the Saviour has suggested in his solemn exhortation. Whatever gratification, or prospect of gain may obstruct the great business of salvation, you must totally relinquish it, though as dear to you, and in your estimation as necessary, as a hand, a foot, or an eye. Do not hesitate because the mortification is painful. It were far better, surely, to suffer the se-

verest operation, to cut off the hand or the foot, or to pluck out the eye, than expose yourselves or others to eternal misery. No inconvenience or distress, to which you can be called here, is to be compared to those endless torments which are reserved for the ungodly. Does not the description excite a horrible dread, while it is expressly declared, three times together, that in hell "their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched?" The sacrifices under the Mosaic law were sprinkled with salt;* in allusion to which it is asserted, that "every one," falling a sacrifice to the justice of God, "shall be salted with fire;" and this represents the fierceness and durable nature of those flames to which the impenitent will be doomed. Would you escape them? The direction is clear: "every sacrifice shall be salted with salt;"† that is, every one truly devoted to God, and whom he will accept, must be consecrated to his service by his grace, which alone can purify and preserve the soul. This is "the salt" which you must obtain; or else, notwithstanding your religious profession, you will be worthless and contemptible.

The subject being important, Jesus continued to enforce an affectionate regard to the least and meanest of his members. While he held the child in his arms, he observed, that we ought not to despise even such an infant, upon which the very angels are commissioned to attend: much less, then, should we disdain the weakest believers (represented by the babe), to whom the highest order of the exalted spirits before the throne

* Lev. ii. 13. † See Bishop Hurd's Sermon on this text.

of God continually minister. Nay, to rescue them from destruction was the end for which "the Son of man" came into the world. He is that "good Shepherd," who seeks the wandering sheep, and rejoices in its recovery, even more than in the rest of his flock, which are already secured within his fold. We also, should possess a similar disposition; and, therefore, so far from obstructing the salvation of any soul, we should delight in promoting it.

Even a Christian brother may sometimes act inconsistently, and we may suffer through his misconduct. But we are not therefore rashly to abandon him, or indulge a vindictive temper. We are immediately to attempt his restoration, first by private admonitions, then by the interference of a few common friends, and, if that method should be ineffectual, by the more public censures of the religious community to which we belong. It is only when every effort fails that we may proceed to the painful extremity, and renounce all fellowship with him. Perhaps this expedient may be salutary; at least it will be proper. And, that discipline might be maintained in his church, our Lord has assured us that the decisions of his ministers and people, acting in his name and from a regard to his glory, shall be ratified in heaven. Not only for the regulation of a Christian society, but for the encouragement of all to meet and offer their united prayers in a dependence upon him, he solemnly promised that their petitions should be granted, and their assemblies honoured with his own immediate presence. Even for the smallest companies the blessing is intended.

“There,” said he, “am I in the midst of them.” How exalted is the language! How gracious the declaration! He can be no other than the omnipotent Jehovah, who “filleteth heaven and earth,” since he engages to manifest himself, in all the various places where his people meet, at the same moment of time. He speaks also in terms peculiar to the Deity, “I AM.” Yet “as his majesty is, so is his mercy.” He will not be unmindful of them who seek him. Let them associate together in his name, professing their regard to him, and offer up their joint petitions, “with one mind and one mouth” pleading its merits, and they shall know that he is in the midst of them, by the strength and comfort of his Spirit. Surely the promise should enliven our affections, and enlarge our expectations, in his service.

As our Lord had insisted on the manner in which dissensions between Christians should be healed, Peter took occasion to propose the inquiry, how often forgiveness should be extended to an offending brother, as if some limits should be affixed to the exercise of our patience and forbearance. But Jesus, in his reply, has taught us, that, if injuries should be multiplied against us without number, we should still be ready to pardon not merely “until seven times, but until seventy times seven;” and even that our lenity to others should be as unbounded as that of God is towards us. This astonishing compassion and grace of our God is represented in an affecting parable. He is the great King, who “takes account of his servants,” and to whom we are indebted in a larger sum than we are able to

compute. Should he rigorously demand payment, our case would indeed be desperate. Let us try the effect of an humble application to his mercy. He will not proceed in strict justice against us, if, under a deep conviction of our wretchedness, we cry, "Lord, have patience with us." He will instantly and freely remit the whole claim. Has he done this for us? And do we not feel a grateful sense of his goodness? Or, where is the person, who, with the hope of having received such a gracious discharge from his Lord, can retain sentiments of anger and revenge against an offending brother, who implores forgiveness? This strange inconsistency is exhibited in the character of the unmerciful man, who experienced such clemency from his master, when his own debt was immense, and yet exacted from his poor fellow-servant, with extreme severity, the payment of a few paltry pence. So trifling are all the injuries, which we can possibly sustain from one another, compared with our manifold and heinous provocations against God. If then, in the warmth of our resentment, we conclude that our brother has no claim to our compassion, and we refuse to extend any mercy to him, what do we but pass sentence upon ourselves? The indignation of the Lord, who had shown so much tenderness, was roused against the inexorable wretch. "So likewise," said our divine Teacher, "shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses."

How tremendous is the thought, that a malicious, cruel, and revengeful disposition is odious in the sight

of God, and, unrepented of, will bring down his heaviest displeasure! And how forcible an argument does it suggest for the exercise of mutual forbearance, candour, and love, among Christians! “ Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil-speaking, be put away from you, with all malice. And be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”*

* Eph. iv. 31, 32.

J E S U S C H R I S T.

SECT. XXIII.

Jesus reproached by his kindred—went to the feast of tabernacles—taught in the temple—miraculously preserved from the rage of the people, and from the officers of the sanhedrim—appealed to concerning an adulteress—renewed his public instructions—answered various cavils—asserted his Deity, and only by a miracle escaped a violent death.

IT was a striking proof of the condescension of Jesus, and no small part of it, that he “endureth such contradiction of sinners against himself.”* That He, who “is Lord of all,” should dwell in mortal flesh, was an instance of deep humiliation: yet he stooped still lower, in bearing the malicious insults and violent opposition of those, who were not only the creatures of his hands, but obnoxious to his wrath, and whom he might in a moment have confounded and destroyed for ever. He suffered their perverseness with unexampled patience, and laboured incessantly for their good. May his servants learn from him “to be gentle unto all men, and in meekness to instruct those that oppose themselves!”

* Heb. xii. 3.

It has been remarked that our Lord continued to preach in Galilee; and it is accounted for by an Evangelist, who observes that he declined spending much time in the neighbourhood of Jerusalem, because of the murderous designs which were there formed against him.* At the approach of the feast of tabernacles,† though he intended to be present at the celebration of that solemnity, he delayed his journey for some days, that he might attract the less notice. But his brethren (which expression includes all those who were nearly related), knowing his constant practice, wondered at this delay, and, with an insolent taunt, desired him to take that opportunity of going to display his works at Jerusalem. They meant to insinuate that he courted popularity, and aimed at nothing more than the public applause. Never was any objection more groundless or more invidious than this. His whole deportment manifested a contrary disposition. But men with a malevolent heart are capable of the basest misrepresentations. There were unbelievers, we perceive, among the kindred of Jesus, and probably in the same house with him, who, though witnesses of his exemplary holiness and miraculous operations, derided and rejected him. They who dwell in a pious family, or are intimately connected with a person eminently religious, enjoy peculiar advantages for their own spiritual improvement; but, even in so favourable a situation, they

* John vii. 1, &c.

† This was one of the grand annual festivals of the Jews, appointed in remembrance of their ancestors dwelling in tents, and kept for seven or eight days together in booths, which were built for that purpose. Lev. xxiii. 34.

may remain in ignorance and contempt of those principles, the excellency of which is continually before their eyes. We do not wonder, therefore, that the faithful servants of Christ are often shamefully calumniated by those who are nearly allied to them; especially as we observe such malignant reproaches cast upon their Lord and Master.

Jesus replied that he was aware how much hatred he had incurred by his severe reproofs, and, therefore, that he should not yet venture himself amongst his decided enemies. He further remarked, that this reason need not detain them, since their conduct was so agreeable to the spirit of the world, as to excite no disgust or malevolence. The observation accounts for all the violence of persecution which is raised against those who boldly condemn the sinful practices of their own times, and shows also that it may be avoided by a mean and servile compliance with the general sentiments and manners. Perhaps our Lord could not trust himself even in the company of his own relations; and therefore he followed them, after some days, with the greatest privacy. Had he neglected this service, he would probably, have been censured as a despiser of religion; for there was an universal expectation of him at the festival, and, as he did not appear at the beginning, there was much inquiry made concerning him. It is evident, then, that he was regular in his attendance on divine ordinances; thus he "fulfilled all righteousness," and left a perfect example to his people. What resemblance of him do they bear, who neglect the sacred institutions of God's house? Do not

their very excuses convict them of profaneness, indolence, or avarice? To tread in his steps, we must carefully observe the appointed times and solemnities of public worship.

It might be also to avoid ostentation, as well as danger, that Jesus travelled to Jerusalem in private. Perhaps even there he concealed himself upon his first arrival; while warm debates were held concerning him, some allowing his integrity, others condemning him as a deceiver, and none daring to avow an attachment to him. But, about the midst of the festival, he appeared in the temple, and delivered his holy instructions with an unshaken firmness and intrepidity, through a pure zeal for the honour of God, and compassion for the souls of the numerous congregation then assembled. The Jews immediately perceived such a depth of sacred knowledge as they could not account for, considering the meanness of his education: but he proceeded to declare that he was invested with a commission from Heaven, and that his doctrine was not the fruit of human learning, or the deductions of reason, but a direct revelation from God. He observed that the evidences were such as would convince an honest inquirer, and that the man who was seriously disposed to do the will of God would certainly attain a right understanding of the truth, however obscure or absurd it might seem to others. As to himself, he maintained that he sought nothing but the divine glory, and therefore that they should receive him, at least, as no impostor.

The Gospel, then, which Jesus taught, demands our

unfeigned regard, because it is a message from God. Herein he still preaches to us, as he did to the Jews of old. Let us examine whether we "know of the doctrine." Are we persuaded of its authority and excellence? Have we a clear perception of its grand design? And have we carefully traced its distinguishing lineaments? If otherwise, we should suspect in ourselves an unsoundness of heart, a determined love of sin, and a spirit of presumptuous disobedience to God. These are the chief causes of infidelity and ignorance where the truth of God is sent: and it is generally evident that men's difficulties and objections betray a perverse and unholy disposition.

Jesus, by a bold appeal, accused his hearers of transgressing the law of which they boasted: some he even charged with harbouring designs of violence against his person. They denied the imputation, and insolently reviled him for it, as if he were under the possession of the devil. He, however, continued to assert that their persecution was most unreasonable and malignant, since they made the cure of diseased and impotent poverty, which he had performed on the sabbath,* a plea for slander, rage, and murder. He showed how inconsistent it was to condemn his miraculous work of mercy, which, in fact, broke not the law of the day, and on the same sacred season themselves to practise the rite of circumcision, out of regard to Moses, who had appointed it, and yet was not its original founder. Why should their decisions be

* John v. 1--16.

regulated by appearances? Why would they not form a just and impartial judgment?

Many of the people were impressed with an admiration of his courage, especially when they knew that there were serious intentions of destroying him; and yet they foolishly concluded that he could not be the Messiah, because his extraction seemed incompatible with that high character. To these captious adversaries he replied, that, notwithstanding their supposed acquaintance with him and his origin, he came to them with an express and full commission from that God, of whom they were ignorant, and with whom he had the most intimate communications. Alas! how many deceive themselves in boasting of their clear perceptions of the divine nature, and their sincere regard to the true God, while they reject or pervert the Gospel! Their very objections to the scheme of salvation by Jesus Christ generally arise from gross misapprehensions, or a fixed hatred, of God's righteous perfections. Let us be willing, that He, who alone hath known the Father, should declare him unto us.

So pointed a reproof and such high claims were more than they could bear. They were filled with rage, and were only prevented from acts of violence by a strong impression upon their minds, which restrained their malice. It was not possible that they should have power to destroy him till the purposes of Heaven were accomplished. Yet there were many of the lower order who seemed convinced that he was indeed the Christ; for they argued rightly, that the promised Deliverer could not perform more astonishing

operations than Jesus had done. These favourable dispositions in the people alarmed the great council of the sanhedrim, which was then assembled; and officers were immediately sent to apprehend him. But the malevolent design was baffled. Jesus continued to preach, even before the face of those who were charged with a commission to seize him. He warned them that, notwithstanding their opposition, he should proceed in his work a little longer; that shortly, returning to the state of glorious exaltation which he had left, he should be removed beyond the reach of their violence; and that they would seek in vain to be admitted into his presence. How solemn the admonition! Alas! how few considered the time of their visitation! How few, in our own day, consider that Jesus, who waits upon them in the ministry of his word, will soon withdraw himself, that the gracious offers now made will never be renewed, and that an eternal separation must take place between them and that Saviour whom they despise! "Where He is, thither they cannot come."

While they were puzzled to comprehend his meaning, he proclaimed aloud the rich mercy of the Gospel, inviting the application of all who were truly desirous of spiritual blessings. To such persons he promised to dispense the abundant influences of the Holy Ghost, for their support and refreshment. He also described those precious emanations, as proceeding from believers, and blessing their numerous connexions, like streams which scatter wide their plenty. This wondrous, this encouraging address to the whole body of

the people, was pronounced on the last day of the feast, at a time when it is probable the assembly was larger than usual; and when, as it is supposed, the officers of justice stood before him. On that day it was customary to fetch water from the fountain of Siloam, and pour it on the altar with great exultation. Perhaps, too, in testimony of this, they sung at the time that remarkable sentence, where the allusion gives life to the description of the Prophet, "With joy shall ye draw water out of the well of salvation."* It is thought that upon this occasion Jesus stood on an eminence, and, exerting his voice, that he might be heard by the surrounding multitudes, directed their attention to himself, as intended to be represented in that ceremony as "the fountain of living waters," communicating the most plentiful supplies of grace to every thirsty soul.

To us, also, the same blessing is offered, the same kind invitation is given. His ambassadors still address us, with similar proposals, "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters!"† The grand source, to which we are referred, remains inexhaustible as ever; nor is there any thing to obstruct our access except our own indifference or aversion. "Let him that is athirst come; and whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely."‡ Have we any ardent desires for those spiritual benefits which Jesus confers? It is well if we be truly sensible of their excellence and importance. Let our application be made unto him without delay, and with earnest solicitation. He will not disappoint

* Isa. xii. 3. See Bishop Lowth on that passage.

† Isa. lv. 1. ‡ Rev. xxii. 17.

our wishes, but even exceed our largest expectations and conceptions ; and perhaps the mercy which we receive may be conveyed to others also, through our means, for their effectual relief and salvation.

These surprising declarations of Jesus excited various debates among the people. Some were disposed to honour him as a Prophet, others to acknowledge him as the Christ ; but, as they hastily concluded that he was born in Galilee, it was argued that he could not fulfil the ancient prophecies concerning the Messiah, and they were too careless or too bigoted to enter into further inquiries. The very men who were employed to apprehend him, and some of whom were disposed to take him by force, listened to his words, till under the strongest impressions of admiration and reverence, they were unable to execute their purpose. They returned without their prisoner, and were constrained to allege, in excuse for not fulfilling their commission, "Never man spake like this man." How easily can the Lord God overawe and confound his enemies ! "Surely the wrath of men shall praise thee : the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain."* We have known many instances of those, who, unaccountably to themselves, have been suddenly obliged to relinquish their designs of violence, and even to plead the cause of persons whom they had vowed to destroy. Not a few have been brought to a state of penitence, under a sermon, while they were seeking objections, and forming malevolent intentions against the preacher.

* Psal. lxxvi. 10.

The sanhedrim, however, was the more exasperated, and represented all, who favoured Jesus, as ignorant, deluded, and infatuated wretches, not worthy to be regarded. Nicodemus attempted to moderate their rage; but he met with a severe rebuke for the prudent advice which he suggested; and perhaps the council broke up in confusion.

The evening approached, and Jesus retired, not to indulge in sensuality or indolence, nor even to obtain the necessary refreshment of sleep. He withdrew to the mount of Olives, at some little distance from the city, where he might give vent to the ardent affections of his soul in secret prayer.* The night, therefore, as well as the day, was devoted to the service of God, with a view probably to the salvation of sinners, for whom he was most anxiously concerned. Let those, who minister in holy things, be instructed from him to mix the duties of private devotion with their public labours, if they wish to be supported and to prosper in their work.

Early in the morning he returned to the temple, and, not discouraged by the opposition he had met with, resumed his employment, teaching the people with the same freedom as before. His insidious adversaries also renewed their attempts with much vigilance and assiduity, though their former schemes were defeated. Some of the Scribes and Pharisees brought an adulteress before him, and desired his decision upon the case, whether or no she should be stoned, according to the Mosaic injunctions. Their intention was to reduce

* John viii. 1, &c.

him to a difficulty, and, from his judgment, whatever it might be, to prefer a serious charge against him. Had he pronounced sentence upon her, they would probably have accused him as an enemy to the Roman government; or, if he had acquitted her, they might have calumniated him as subverting their law, and favouring the sin which she had committed. For some time he seemed to pay no regard to their question; but when they urged him to reply, he showed his knowledge of their hearts, and displayed his power as well as wisdom by confounding their purpose. His answer was, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her:" and it was such a pointed application to their consciences, and so forcibly impressed, that it obliged them to depart, and thus tacitly to acknowledge their own guilt. Immediately, the gracious Redeemer dismissed the poor criminal without condemnation; for he acted not as the civil magistrate, and would not pronounce her offence unpardonable: but he solemnly admonished her to sin no more. Who, then, shall presume to contend with Him? "He disappointeth the devices of the crafty, so that their hands cannot perform their enterprise."* But transgressors, even of the most atrocious kind, who tremble before him, need not despair of his mercy. Only let them remember his salutary caution, nor dare, in any future instance, to renew their wicked practices.

Jesus continued to deliver his instructions to the people, still maintaining his own divine character, and exhibiting himself as the Author of all spiritual blessings.

* Job v. 12.

Perhaps from the view of the sun, then breaking forth upon them, he took occasion to compare himself to that grand luminary, declaring that only by a regard to him we can be rescued from fatal delusion, and conducted in the paths of peace and joy to a state of eternal blessedness above. As the festival was ended, many of his hearers, probably, were preparing to return to their respective abodes, and their common occupations. The brightness of the day was the traveller's opportunity ; but Jesus exhorted him to remember the presence of a better light, which would never leave him benighted. Are our eyes then directed unto Him, as the only source of wisdom, strength, and comfort to the soul ? Do we discover any glory in him, which may properly, though inadequately, be represented by that most resplendent body in the firmament ? Do we walk by his light ; or are the benefits which we receive from him adequate to such an exalted description as this ?

It was objected that his doctrine rested merely on his own assertion, and therefore could not be credited. But he replied, that sufficient testimony of his high character had been already given, and that they condemned him through the influence of carnal prejudices. He argued, also, that his declarations demanded their implicit assent, as he had produced the strongest proofs of his Father's presence with him ; but that, while they cavilled at his claims, they showed their entire ignorance of his Father, as well as of him. This was a bold charge indeed ; and, considering his situation and their malevolence, it was wonderful that they bore it. But

they were still under an invisible restraint, as the full time for his being delivered into their hands was not arrived. He continued, therefore, to warn them that he should shortly leave them to perish in their unbelief, and that then it would be too late to solicit an admission into his presence. When they turned his very warning into ridicule, he declared more plainly that he descended from the heavenly world, and properly belonged to it; but that they were entirely earthly in their views, affections, and pursuits, and that by rejecting him they would sink under the curse of their sins into final destruction.

Ah! how foolish as well as wicked is the conduct of those who persist in opposing the Saviour, to their own inevitable ruin! They trifle away their precious moments in raising one petulant objection after another, while they stand on the brink of eternal misery. Should we not desire to rouse them from their lethargy? What mean your indifference and levity? Have you forgotten that the grand concerns of your souls are still unsecured? Instead of replying to your subtleties, we would faithfully denounce "the terrors of the Lord," and entreat you, without delay, to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, lest you "die in your sins."

Still unwilling to admit, perhaps deriding, his claims, some insolently asked whom he pretended to be. He confirmed his former assertions, and replied, that, though he had many charges to bring against them, he should only for the present maintain that he acted by a sacred commission, and delivered no other doctrine than what he had received from the Father. Yet,

plain as these declarations were, the people, blinded by their prejudices, did not comprehend his meaning. He, however, foretold, that, after taking him off by the violent death of the cross, they would be struck with a conviction of his divine character and high office ; and he solemnly assured them, that, though rejected and scorned by sinners, he was not deserted of his heavenly Father, but was the constant object of his complacency and delight. O, let us fear to indulge a captious disposition, lest we be given up to a reprobate mind ! Is not this exalted Teacher “ worthy of all acceptation ? ” Why, then, do we not sincerely and thankfully submit to his instructions ? Does not our perverse opposition evince a proud and an earthly mind ?

His bold and serious harangue, though generally despised, produced an evident impression on some of the company, who, therefore, professed to regard him as the Messiah. Addressing himself to these persons in particular, he exhorted them to yield a steadfast and persevering attention to his word, and thereby to prove themselves, beyond a doubt, his faithful disciples. He subjoined a most gracious promise, that in this way they should be enlightened with such a knowledge of his doctrine, as would establish them in a state of glorious freedom. Yet so captious were the multitude, that even this very promise gave offence. His proposal of conferring freedom implied that they had been in servitude ; which they resented as a gross insult, boasting of their high privileges as the children of Abraham. Their proud and ignorant objection, how-

ever, led him to show that his meaning was spiritual; and he replied to the following effect:—

“Little as you may be aware of the melancholy truth, I solemnly assure you that every one practising iniquity is actually a slave to sin, the worst of tyrants. So circumstanced, then, notwithstanding your descent from Abraham, you are not the children of God, and may expect to be excluded from his household. But I, his only-begotten Son, who am entitled to all the honours of his family, am empowered likewise to confer them upon you; so that, if you receive the liberty which I bestow, you will be rescued from a state of miserable bondage, and the most exalted privileges be secured to you for ever. You boast, and I allow, your extraction from an illustrious Patriarch; but his genuine offspring are not, as you are, incensed at my doctrine, nor filled with murderous rage against me. My word has place in them, though not in you. I declare the will of my Father, that which I know to be so, from the most intimate acquaintance with his mind: and you also show by your deportment what you have learned from your father.”

Here they interrupted him, still maintaining that they sprang from no other than Abraham. But Jesus proceeded:—“Were you indeed the children of Abraham, you would tread in his steps: but how widely do you differ from him in your spirit and conduct, while you are aiming at my life, for boldly asserting among you the truth of God! Your actions correspond with the original from which you are derived.” This insinuation they considered as reproachful to their cha-

racter, and contended that God was their Father. The Saviour answered :—“ If such were your near relation to God, you would discover an affectionate regard to me, who am his immediate offspring, and have received my commission from him alone. To what shall I ascribe your ignorance of my meaning, but to your carnal dispositions, which have effectually stopped your ears against me? You, therefore, belong to another family, and are evidently the children of the wicked one, whose very tempers you betray : he has been uniformly seeking the destruction of mankind, and, by the basest treachery and falsehood, opposing divine truth : he is the parent of murder and of lies. You reject me merely because I have faithfully declared to you the counsel of God. I dare appeal to you, prejudiced as you are, that you cannot bring any charge of guilt against me : and, if you must admit my integrity, why will you not credit my assertions? Every one who is born of God, and under the influence of his grace, will yield a serious attention and an unreserved submission to his will, in whatever manner it be revealed : this, therefore, cannot be your character, as you prove by your perverse and obstinate unbelief.”

These severe reproofs exasperated the Jews still more, so that they replied, with manifest rancour, that they were now justified in their suspicions of him, as being an enemy to their religion, like the Samaritans, and acting under the instigation of the devil. He repelled the blasphemous charge with singular meekness, observing, that so far from having connexions with Satan, he had uniformly shown what had brought their

contempt upon him, a zealous regard to his Father's glory; that, though he might be indifferent about his own personal honour, yet there was One, who would assert it to their entire condemnation. He added, also, the most gracious and solemn protestations, for the encouragement of the penitent, that the sincere believer in him should never taste the bitterness, or come under the power, of death. The precious promise, no less than his reproofs, incensed them, and confirmed them in the persuasion that he was actuated by a diabolical influence. They grossly misapprehended him, as if none of his followers should suffer even the dissolution of the body, and insolently asked, what privilege or dignity he claimed beyond the ancient Prophets.

He answered, "If my claims were unsupported, they might safely be despised; but I appeal to the attestations of that God, to whom you profess to stand in a peculiar relation. Alas! your pretences are false and presumptuous: on the contrary, I possess the most perfect knowledge of him and yield a constant and exact obedience to him. You reject me with scorn; but Abraham, your great progenitor, showed the highest possible respect for my character, looking forwards with ardent desires to the day of my appearance, and, by faith, exulting in the prospect." Thus he plainly declared himself to be the Messiah, whilst they continued most foolishly to carp at his expressions, as implying that he had been cotemporary with Abraham upon the earth. To give the most decisive answer to their cavils, and to assert his own Deity, in express and unequivocal terms he added, while he called their atten-

tion as to a certain and interesting truth, "Before Abraham was, I AM." This language was too clear to be misunderstood, and it contains a doctrine too important to be abandoned. The very mode of speaking which he adopted is peculiar to the Godhead; and it amounts to a full proof that he is the unchangeable Jehovah, who remains "the same" from everlasting to everlasting, and, therefore, that the ages and generations of men make no difference in his existence. He affirmed, then, that he is that very God who revealed himself to Moses by that adorable name, "I AM."* In this sense, it should seem, they received it; for immediately, conceiving him to be guilty of blasphemy, as he would have been on the supposition of his mere humanity, they prepared to stone him; and he escaped from their fury only by a miracle, concealing himself from their observation, while he withdrew from the tumultuous assembly.

How remarkable was the whole of this debate! It exhibits a striking representation of the blindness and perverseness of sinners, as also of the meekness and condescension of the Saviour. Those, whose office calls them to maintain and propagate the Gospel, may expect a similar opposition from men who are destitute of the truth. Probably the most unreasonable prejudices will so prevail, as greatly to obstruct their usefulness. The plainest expressions may be misunderstood, or wilfully distorted; the most malicious charges may be urged against them, and their characters blackened by the basest aspersions. All this may be done,

* Exod. iii. 14.

even among the people for whose eternal welfare they are labouring with the most generous and unwearied assiduity. But let them study, and endeavour to copy, this divine exemplar. Like the blessed Jesus, it will become them to stand unmoved against all the assaults of ignorance, pride, and envy, to obviate mistakes, and inculcate right doctrines with patience and forbearance. Yet, consistently with this gentleness of spirit, they should also warn the impenitent, and, without fear or reserve, denounce "the terrors of the Lord." They should reprove and admonish, not with rashness or malevolence, but with courage and fidelity; and, while they plainly represent the state and character of the ungodly, affectionately beseech them "to flee from the wrath to come."

Would to God that opposition to Christ had been confined to the Jews! Are there none among us, who in a similar way resist the truth? How vile their affections! How wretched their condition! They may boast of liberty, but "they are the servants of corruption." They may suppose that they are doing God service, and be ready to demand a recompense from him, even while they fulfil the purposes of Satan, and prove themselves to be totally under his influence. They may pretend to a peculiar penetration and discernment, when they are deluded by "the father of lies," and, through the ascendancy of carnal principles, "cannot hear" the pure doctrine of the Gospel. Let us pray that we may not be given up to such infatuation.

Do we, then, believe in Jesus, as he is here exhibited? Do we triumph in that Saviour whom Abraham

beheld with joy? Do we trust in him, adore, praise, and serve him, as being no other than JEHOVAH, the great "I AM," "God over all, blessed for ever?" Surely his character will justify our strongest confidence. Let us not renounce our faith, or be ashamed of our attachment. He himself exhorts us "not to be moved away from the hope of the Gospel." How animating are his promises to those who "continue in his word!" He will afford us increasing knowledge of his truth, gradually dispersing the darkness of our minds; he will break off the fetters in which sin has long held us captive, and bring us into the glorious liberty of the children of God. He will even disarm death of its terrors, enable us to smile in the near prospect of it, and give us a perfect and everlasting deliverance. May every reader, then, possess such a firm and unshaken dependence upon him, as to say, "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day!"* Amen.

* 2 Tim. i. 12.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. XXIV.

Jesus sent out seventy disciples to preach—received and addressed them upon their return—replied to the captious lawyer, and delivered the parable of the good Samaritan—visited Martha and Mary at Bethany—taught and encouraged his disciples to pray—dined with a Pharisee, and gave the most severe reproofs.

IN this practical review of the life of Jesus, it is intended to introduce the principal occurrences according to their regular order, where it can be ascertained; but on some occasions we may be allowed to depart from it, for a more convenient division of the subject into different sections. It is not of so much importance to arrange and harmonize the four Gospels, as to obtain a right knowledge of the glorious Character there delineated, and participate the rich blessings proposed to us.

As Jesus designed to take one more journey through Galilee, he chose out a large company of assistants, whom he sent before to every town which he himself meant to visit, that, by their preaching, a serious attention might be excited among the people, and their minds disposed to receive him upon his personal ap-

pearance.* The twelve Apostles had already gone forth with his commission, and now he selected SEVENTY other persons, the exact number fixed on for the relief of Moses in his office.† These also he divided into pairs, that they might strengthen each other's hands; and, upon their departure, he gave them instructions similar to those which he had delivered to the Apostles. This appointment, probably, took place before his attendance at the feast of tabernacles, last mentioned.

He addressed them to the following purpose:—
 “Unite your fervent prayers for more labourers to be sent out into the very extensive field which lies before you, that the harvest may be gathered in; for, though a large addition is now made, there is sufficient work to call for a further increase. And, as none should presume to intrude themselves into this employment, your application should be to the great Lord of the harvest, who alone can discern the proper persons, and furnish them with all necessary preparations for the sacred function. You go forth under my directions “as lambs among wolves,” in the face of furious adversaries, who will endeavour to harass and destroy you. But commit yourselves to the care of divine Providence; nor take with you any supplies for your temporal support. Like men in haste, who are dispatched upon urgent business, you are to lose no time in vain compliments:‡ yet neglect not to give the strongest proofs of your benevolence, by praying for every family which you visit: and You at least, if not They, shall receive the benefit. Whatever entertainment

* Luke x. 1, &c. † Numb. xi. 16. ‡ 2 Kings iv. 29.

may be offered, you will not scruple to accept it, as the wages earned by your labour; but remove not from one house to another for your own indulgence, or in search of better accommodations. In confirmation of your doctrine, and as an intimation of its benign tendency, I now invest you with full powers to heal the sick; but at the same time you must proclaim the approach of the Saviour, coming to establish his kingdom. While you depart from the people who despise your message, solemnly warn them of their sin and danger, since aggravated ruin will come upon them for their contempt of mercy. The curse of an incensed God awaits the inhabitants of those cities which have scornfully rejected my ministry; and, however exalted their privileges have been, they shall finally perish with a much more tremendous destruction than even those abandoned places Sodom, Tyre, and Sidon, which have already felt the weight of divine vengeance. Thus, also, I shall consider myself, and my Almighty Father likewise, either as regarded or contemned by the persons among whom you shall discharge your embassy; and upon their conduct towards you their everlasting salvation or perdition will depend."

What eager solicitude, what a generous concern, did Jesus discover for the welfare of mankind! What various methods he devised, to save immortal souls! He sent out, we observe, a numerous company of harbingers and heralds, proclaiming pardon and peace; and he himself took one laborious journey after another, for the same benevolent purpose. Nor was his love less conspicuous when he warned the despisers of his

Gospel that the most tremendous woes were coming upon them? for he poured out his heart in deep distress on their account. Still he presides as Head over his church; and still, with a view to rescue sinners from eternal misery, he raises up and employs many ambassadors in his service, to whom he "commits the word of reconciliation." And, as it seems most probable that he will promote the cause of truth and righteousness in the earth by means of faithful and evangelical ministers, we should unite our prayers to him for their increase, that by their testimony his name may be declared from town to town, and from one kingdom to another. Where he sends his messengers, we are encouraged to hope that he himself will soon appear, for the advancement of his own glory. Yes; he will be present to support and prosper them in their arduous and important work. He has promised, "Lo! I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."*

We would, therefore, entreat those, among whom this proclamation of mercy is made, to consider how much depends upon it. "It is not a vain thing for you, because it is your life."† If it be not effectual to save you, it will aggravate your condemnation. Those, who "watch for your souls," will finally witness either for or against you, according to the reception which you give to their words. They are the representatives of their adorable Lord and Master, who will shortly arise to vindicate his own cause: and how will you meet him, if you treat his gracious proposals with scorn or indifference?

* Matt. xxviii. 20.

† Deut. xxxii. 47.

The seventy disciples returned to Jesus, perhaps about the feast of tabernacles, with an account of their ministry. They appeared to be elated, as having succeeded beyond their expectation; and expressed their grateful surprise, because the very devils were subject to them through his name, as if nothing, from that time, should be able to stand against them. Jesus himself, also, triumphed in the downfall of Satan, not only as approving the punishment inflicted on him for his original apostacy, but as foreseeing the ruin of his interest and kingdom in the world to be approaching. He promised, therefore, to confirm to his disciples the miraculous powers which they had exercised, and to support them against every snare and danger. But, lest they should "be exalted above measure" through their distinguished privileges, he reminded them that these were comparatively of little worth, and that it was a far greater cause of thankfulness and joy to be admitted into the family of God, and enrolled among the heirs of heaven, than to possess the most absolute dominion over the infernal spirits.

On this occasion the Saviour exulted in his heart, and broke forth into expressions of grateful satisfaction, from the prospect of what these feeble instruments should accomplish, though opposed by persons of consummate wisdom and prudence. But how profound the mystery! Salvation is revealed to those who are weak, and of as little account as babes, while men of admired abilities and high rank remain in ignorance and contempt of it. In this inscrutable dispensation Jesus acquiesced and rejoiced. The Lord God is a

righteous Sovereign ; and, under a full conviction of his equity, we should submit implicitly to his appointments, though we see not the reasons of them. It should suffice us that "so it seemed good in his sight."

Jesus took that opportunity, also, to direct the regard of his disciples to himself, as united with the Father in the grand economy of grace, as possessing an extent of power and understanding far beyond the reach of any creature, and as the only One, who, from his own immediate and intuitive knowledge, can declare the nature and will of God. Then likewise, to excite their thankfulness for being acquainted with him, he congratulated them apart from the rest, because they were favoured with higher privileges, and clearer discernment in divine things, than many of the most eminent characters in old times, prophets and kings, who were beloved of God.

And are not our obligations immense, if we "have obtained like-precious faith," and can on solid ground conclude that our "names are written in the book of life?" For, "how great things hath God done for us!" We need not envy those who were invested even with the apostolical commission and miraculous power. That grace, which is infinitely more valuable, is bestowed upon us, Our distinguished felicity appears the more remarkable, when we observe that many are destitute of it, who in every other respect are far advanced above us. Are we the "babes," to whom God "hath revealed these things?" The reason must be sought, not in us, but in his unsearchable counsels. Surely in the contemplation of this mercy we shall cry out, with

wonder, love, and praise, " Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight." Let us also pray for those, who are yet in darkness, that they may partake of our happiness, by being " called into marvellous light ;" that their eyes may be blessed, in beholding the glory and excellency of our Redeemer.

During some part of our Lord's address to the seventy upon their return, it should seem that he was surrounded by a large company. Among the rest was a certain lawyer, one of those who studied and expounded the law of Moses. He, professing some regard, but designing to involve him in a difficulty, came forward, and proposed a question. It is likely that he felt much self-confidence, or entertained a secret contempt of Jesus, while he begged to be informed what he must do for the attainment of eternal life. The subject is indeed important above all others ; and, had the information been asked with an humble teachable disposition, Jesus would not have refused a direct and explicit answer. But, as he knew the proud and captious temper of the man, he replied in a way which might tend to humble or silence him. He referred him to the demands of the law (upon his obedience to which the Scribe placed his dependence), assuring him that an entire compliance with those claims of perfect love, both to God and men, would entitle him to the blessedness of heaven, as the just recompense of his deeds ; " This do, and thou shalt live : " as if he had said, " Perform, in their utmost extent, without diminution or interruption, all the injunctions of God's righteous commands, and sure and everlasting reward will await thee : but

the least deviation or defect will expose thee to condemnation.”*

In the same manner it may be proper to treat all such persons as value themselves on their supposed goodness. This method seems calculated to convince them of their ignorance and presumption ; so that the law may serve “ as a schoolmaster to bring them unto Christ, that they may be justified by faith.”† We ask, if your hopes are built on your own duties, are you aware how much is required of you? Have you never failed of loving God supremely and fervently, with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind ; or your neighbour as yourselves? If these dispositions have had their constant and full influence upon you, from your earliest moments to this present hour, you need not implore mercy, or be indebted to the Saviour : on the ground of justice, according to “ the law of works,” you may expect and even claim eternal life. But does not this very representation awaken your fears, rather than flatter your pride, or confirm your vain confidence?

What effect was produced upon the Scribe? He was neither humbled nor silenced ; but still desirous to stand upon his own defence, and perhaps in order to evade conviction, he proposed another question, “ Who is my neighbour ?” From this circumstance our Lord took occasion to confute the erroneous notion, then generally prevalent, that neighbours included only particular friends, and such as were situated near to each other, or connected by the bonds of kindred or reli-

* See Gal. iii. 10--13.

† 24.

gion. The sense of the law was confined within a narrow compass, while it was thought that none but persons of this description only have any claim upon our benevolence. Jesus, however, showed that we are indispensably required to extend our utmost kindness to all our fellow-creatures in distress, of whatever nation or profession, though separated from us, or even incensed against us, by party quarrels or distinctions. This he did, in the parable of the good Samaritan, an affecting and instructive little history, the circumstances of which are so naturally combined, and related with such simplicity, that it cannot fail to interest every reader.

A Jew is represented as reduced to the most calamitous and dangerous condition, through the violence of robbers. Two men of sacred character, a Priest, and a Levite, travelling the same road, were witnesses of his misery: and though their office, in an especial manner, should have disposed them to every act of tenderness and compassion, they turned away from the painful sight, without even attempting his relief. But a Samaritan, who was taught from his earliest years to hate and avoid the Jews, felt commiseration upon the first view of the wretched object. Forgetting the odious contentions between the two nations, he ran to his assistance, and, with peculiar kindness, made effectual provision for his support. Such a conduct was the strongest proof of benevolence. He bound up the wounds of a stranger in misfortune, and supplied the necessities of a plundered enemy. Even this bigoted Scribe was constrained to admire the

Samaritan, and to confess that he had shown himself a neighbour indeed.

The proper application is pointed out. To each of us, as well as to the lawyer, the Saviour says, "Go, and do thou likewise." There cannot be a more delicate or more forcible reproof of a cruel, covetous, and narrow mind; or a more striking representation of the necessity and happy effects of an enlarged charity. How unbounded, how active and generous, should our love be! But do we really appear to possess such a disposition? Where are the fruits? Do we not betray a proud, contracted, and unfeeling spirit? Are we not restrained from doing good, sometimes by selfishness, sometimes by malevolence? Alas! who can say that he has uniformly looked upon all men as his neighbours, and treated them with the same kindness which he should expect for himself in similar circumstances? How little do we resemble our great Pattern, who has exhibited the most extensive and disinterested benevolence! The Lord Jesus "remembered us in our low estate," and, though we were "sinners and enemies," not only stretched out his arm to rescue us from misery, but gave himself a sacrifice, and "died for the ungodly."* May the contemplation of this love excite us to "love one another, with a pure heart fervently!"†

At Bethany, about two miles distant from Jerusalem, lived an amiable family, to which our Lord seems to have been much attached. It was probably upon his return from the feast of tabernacles that he called at

* Rom. v. 6--10.

† 1 Pet. i. 22.

this village to visit Lazarus and his sisters. The interview is mentioned, chiefly that we may remark the different kinds of attention which these two pious women paid to Jesus. They both received him with great affection. Mary placed herself at his feet, like an humble scholar, with an eager desire to imbibe his important instructions. But Martha, to whom perhaps the chief care of their domestic affairs belonged, discovered her regard to him by her solicitude to provide a proper entertainment. The latter, however, being too intent upon that object, complained, with some marks of peevishness, that her sister did not help her. Their Visitant, upon this, with much tenderness reproved Martha for her unseasonable and immoderate anxiety about the various concerns of the family, or the preparing of such accommodations as were trifling, if not needless; and at the same time solemnly reminded her, that, while many lower matters engaged her attention and distracted her thoughts, "one thing" was of absolute necessity, and that all others should give place to it. On this ground he commended the conduct of Mary, who appeared to be more "spiritually minded," as improving the opportunity for her own greatest advantage. He declared that Mary had acted wisely in preferring "the good part," because it is excellent in itself, and infinitely more valuable than all earthly possessions. It is, what they are not, secure and inviolable.

The example as well as the observations of Jesus, upon this occasion, will furnish solid instruction. We should learn from him to show the influence of our re-

ligion, as well in our common intercourse with each other as in the temple and closet. In every house where he was admitted he delivered his heavenly doctrines, "his mouth speaking wisdom, and his tongue talking of judgment."* And shall we be unwilling or ashamed to introduce any mention of our spiritual concerns, wherever we may be? How do we appear to have the mind of Christ, if divine things engage no part of our private conversation? Do not some plead the cares of a family, the hurry of business, and an attention to company, as if these were of the first consequence, or as if God were to be regarded, and the interests of the soul consulted, only in the second place? What, then, has Jesus taught you? He declares "One thing is needful:" but how many things are so in your estimation! That which he enjoins you, as important above all others, is either totally forgotten, or thrust aside, that you may be more at leisure to pursue what is of little worth, and cannot long be secured. Even some pious persons are much obstructed in their spiritual progress through an excessive anxiety about their secular affairs. They do not, therefore, as they ought, glorify God by bringing forth fruit abundantly, nor do they enjoy the comforts of religion in themselves. But the greater part of mankind seem entirely carnal; for they propose no higher object to themselves than to gratify their animal nature; as if "the one thing needful" were to make the most of the present life, to eat, drink, and be merry. A zealous regard to religion is condemned and derided, as extreme folly,

* Psal. xxxvii. 30.

though it be the truest wisdom. The servant of Jesus, who is observed to "sit at his feet and hear his word," is complained of as deserting his post. But his divine Master will plead his cause to the confusion of his opponents; and, when they shall be for ever separated from all that is now dear to them, he will possess a treasure and a happiness in the heavens, "which shall not be taken away from him."

On another occasion, and in a different place, where Jesus had retired, he was requested by one of his disciples, at the conclusion of his devotions, to teach them to pray, as John also had taught his followers.* It cannot be supposed that they had continued so long with him in ignorance or neglect of this duty; for they must have learned the necessity of it both from his example and his exhortations. But they now desired some particular instructions, perhaps some form of prayer, to be delivered to them: and it is supposed that the most eminent Jewish masters, as well as John the Baptist, gave their respective scholars and adherents a short model for their worship. In compliance with their wishes, then, he repeated, with certain trifling alterations, that brief but comprehensive address to God, with which he had furnished them before, as a directory for their devotions; and now he appointed it to be used as a stated form.†

It has been already observed that it might be adapted to the peculiar situation of the disciples, and intended only for that period. We could not, however, at the same time, help remarking, that, as the expressions

* Luke xi. 1—13.

† See Sect. 10.

are suitable for Christians in all ages and circumstances, it may still be retained with great propriety, both in public and private worship, though not to the exclusion of other petitions. The composition is wonderful and excellent, beyond any commendation which we can offer. We call upon those, who desire to serve God acceptably, to study the full sense of all its parts distinctly, and endeavour to enter into its true spirit. Consider how you pray. You are here taught to approach to God with affection and confidence as to your Father, yet with profound reverence as to him who "hath prepared his throne in the heavens." His name should be dear to you ; and you should implore grace for others, that it may be known and sanctified in every place, requesting also that he would establish his kingdom in righteousness by the everlasting Gospel, and that all the inhabitants of the earth may unite with those of heaven in yielding him a cheerful and perfect obedience. Looking up in faith, you must ask your daily support from him. You must confess to him your numerous and aggravated offences, humbly seeking his forgiveness, and declaring your readiness to pardon every injury received from your fellow-creatures. Yet, as you will be constantly exposed to fresh temptations, entreat him to strengthen and preserve you by the power of his Spirit, and to rescue you out of the hands of your enemy.

Such are the supplications which you are taught to offer ; but you should pray as persons in earnest, who are unwilling to take a denial. Our Lord assures you, that, as one man prevails upon another, if not by argu-

ment, or through the influence of friendship, yet by his incessant solicitation, you also, by the fervour and importunity of your requests, may have power with God, and obtain his blessing. The promises of Jesus for your success are absolute and inviolable. No instance can be produced of any one continuing to wait upon God with unwearied diligence and ardent devotion, who was finally rejected. You are encouraged to expect a favourable answer, from God's parental disposition. If you feel the affection of a father, what would you not grant to your beloved offspring, who earnestly entreat your assistance? You, indeed, who are "evil," may easily be warped from your duty, under the influence of corrupt passions; yet you cannot refuse to relieve your children. And shall God withhold any thing really good from those who send up their unceasing petitions to him? No: he will give them his Holy Spirit, which will "fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness," But, ah! how cold, how lifeless, are your prayers, if the duty be at all attempted! Shall you complain, or wonder, that you succeed no better? Will you not be roused to greater fervour? But, if you "restrain prayer before God," and call not upon his name, your guilt is extreme: and his tender mercies in waiting to be gracious will render you the more inexcusable.

It may be difficult, nor is it of any real importance to ascertain the exact connexion of the following narrative. But at another time, when Jesus was delivering his instructions to the people, he received an invitation to dinner from a Pharisee, which he immediately

accepted with his general affability and condescension.* It should seem from the sequel, and from the manner of our Lord's address, that a scheme was formed to insnare him, and that for this purpose a large company of his usual opponents was collected together. But their malicious project was baffled ; and they met with a most severe reprehension for their odious hypocrisy, and the numerous inconsistencies of their conduct.

Jesus sat down to eat without observing the common ceremony of washing his hands ; when the master of the house, who narrowly watched him, secretly condemned him for the neglect. Our Lord was aware of the objection, though it was not avowed ; and therefore he took the opportunity, not so much of vindicating himself, as of exposing the folly and dissimulation of the Pharisees in general. Many were then before him, and yet with remarkable plainness and courage he re-proved them, while he detected their avarice and oppression, their pride and malignity of heart. He pointed out their absurdity in paying such scrupulous attention to external purifications, while their minds were filled with schemes of rapine, and various kinds of wickedness. He exhorted them to consider that the God who made them would not be satisfied with any outward observances, and that their great object should be to approve themselves to him. He urged them to renounce their covetousness and cruel exactions, and to be kind and liberal to the poor ; in which way their food would be much more effectually sanctified to them than merely by the cleansing of their hands.

* Luke xi. 37, &c.

Their danger was not to be concealed; and therefore, that they might no longer flatter themselves, he addressed them in a language the most authoritative and majestic, and denounced against them one tremendous wo upon another for their neglect of real and inward holiness while they boasted of their formalities. He exposed, also, their ostentation and ambition, and their egregious hypocrisy, by which so many were deceived to their utter ruin.

Jesus having included the Scribes in one of his reproofs, a person then present, belonging to that profession, expressed some degree of warmth that they too should be so severely censured. But, neither fearing their anger nor courting their favour, he proceeded to condemn them for enjoining so many burdensome rites upon the people, by their absurd interpretations and traditions, while they themselves observed not their own precepts. They pretended a regard for the ancient prophets, and built the tombs of the men whom their fathers had slain. But, as they inherited the cruel and persecuting disposition of their ancestors, they were convicted of the grossest hypocrisy; and the very sepulchres which they erected witnessed against them. Jesus therefore, knowing what was in their hearts, and what terrible consequences would follow from their violent opposition to the Apostles and preachers of the Gospel, solemnly declared that God, in righteous judgment, would shortly reckon with that generation, and bring the most awful desolations upon them for all the blood of his martyred saints which had been shed from the foundation of the world. These perverse ex-

pounders of the law had to answer likewise for the general ignorance of the people. By their false, though specious comments, they locked up the grand treasury of divine knowledge, and prevented others from receiving the Saviour! How great an aggravation of their own guilt! How could it be otherwise than that the curse of God should rest upon them?

Such were the reproofs of Jesus, suited, no doubt, to the state and temper of his hearers. It is not for us, who possess not his information or authority, to thunder out anathemas in the same manner. But his ministers, surely, should learn from him to be bold and strenuous in rebuking sin, and to declare, without respect of persons, that "the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience."* Very frequent occasions call for language of this kind: for how numerous is the company of gross offenders, as well as ceremonious hypocrites! Shall the servant of the Lord, then, keep silence, or debase his office by smooth and flattering addresses? No: "whether men will hear, or whether they will forbear," he must "cry aloud and spare not," while he faithfully "shows them their transgression." The event must be left to God.

What effect had our Lord's address upon his proud and captious auditors? Their indignation was kindled, and yet they knew not how to vent it. They set upon him with fury, urging him to speak on various subjects, only that they might bring an accusation against him. But such was his wisdom, that their schemes could not prevail. Their case stands as an admonition

* Col. iii. 6.

to future ages : and from them we should be warned to beware of formality, and of opposition to Christ or his people. How terrible the condemnation of those who are incensed by the very word which should humble them ! “ Wherefore, as the Holy Ghost saith, To-day, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts.”*

* Heb. iii. 7, 8.

J E S U S C H R I S T.

SECT. XXV.

Jesus warned his disciples of hypocrisy and cowardice—delivered the parable of the rich fool—gave cautions against worldliness—exhorted to prepare for his coming—foretold violent persecutions—preached the necessity of repentance, on the massacre of the Galileans—described the barren fig-tree—healed an infirm woman on the sabbath—showed that many will be shut out of heaven—his message to Herod, and lamentation for Jerusalem.

THE conclusion of the preceding section represented our Lord in the midst of malicious enemies, at the house of a Pharisee, where he was invited to dine. During his continuance there, so great was the eagerness of the people without to hear his instructions, that an immense company, consisting of many thousands, assembled together, and even trampled on each other, from an earnest desire to be near him.* To gratify their wishes, therefore, he went out, and, in the presence of them all, gave a solemn charge to his disciples, that they might not be misled or discouraged by the opponents with whom he had been contending. He

* Luke xii. 1, &c.

cautioned them to beware of that dissimulation which he had just condemned in the Pharisees, and which would operate in them like leaven, imperceptibly spreading its influence around. It was easy to assume the garb of religion, and make high pretences to a peculiar sanctity. But what would this avail? As it cannot impose upon God, so there is a day coming, when it shall be published to the whole world; for every secret thing shall be brought to light. Ah! how different from our present apprehension will many characters then appear! What dishonesty, treachery, and oppression, what malice and revenge, what lewdness and intemperance, will be discovered, which are now concealed from human observation, and often cloaked under a show of piety! Who shall stand the test of that scrutiny? Those who now possess no more than a painted outside will then be the objects of contempt and abhorrence.

The disciples had seen something of the furious opposition of these insidious adversaries, which might have had a bad effect upon their minds, in deterring them from a bold profession of the Gospel. Jesus, therefore, thus exhorted them to maintain a holy firmness in their adherence to his cause:—"You, my friends, must prepare to meet with cruel persecution; but in my service it will be dishonourable for you to dread those who may resist, however great and powerful they may be. You cannot suffer much or long from their rage. They may, possibly, be permitted to take away the life of your bodies; but their malicious efforts can extend no further. Let the Lord God Omnipotent be the sole object of your fear. His in-

fluence reaches to the eternal world, and, if he be your enemy, he can render you miserable both in your bodies and your souls for ever. Commit yourselves to his care, and he will provide for your support. He, who forgetteth not the sparrows, worthless as they may seem, is constantly mindful of your minutest concerns: "the very hairs of your head are all numbered." But, whatever temporal advantages you may lose for your attachment to me, I, your Lord and Master, whom you are not ashamed to follow, will acknowledge, approve, and honour you, before that glorious assemblage of angels, who shall attend me in the day of my future appearance. Then the persons who have declined an open profession of my name, through cowardice or other worldly motives, shall meet with a different recompense; in a manner equally public they shall be disowned and rejected, as base and detestable characters: They, indeed, who now oppose Me, may yet obtain forgiveness: I am the Son of man, who come in mercy, not in judgment. But the case of those, who continue to despise the multiplied testimonies of the Holy Ghost, and blasphemously ascribe his operations to the influence of Satan, is remediless and desperate, their sin unpardonable. That divine Agent, whom they treat with impious scorn, will afford You his most gracious direction and support in your severest trials. Depending on his aid, you may cheerfully face your persecutors, when you are called to answer at their tribunals: He will inspire you with wisdom and courage, and furnish you with words and arguments to plead my cause, so that you shall never be confounded before them."

Such were the Saviour's exhortations to his ancient disciples : and surely of us also he requires the same steadfastness of faith, the same contempt of the rage and threatenings of men, the same unshaken adherence to him and his service. Have we any reason for dread, while the God of heaven is engaged to sustain, protect, and comfort us, and a crown of glory is secured to us at the end of our warfare? Let those tremble for the consequences, who, in opposing Christ, undertake to "fight against God." However his patience may bear long with them, at last he will arise to execute judgment, when they shall be driven away "as chaff before the wind," and overwhelmed with everlasting horror and despair.

After this address, Jesus was desired by one of the company to persuade his brother to agree to a fair division of their paternal inheritance. This our Lord declined, as being a matter totally foreign to his character and office. His grand design was to draw men's attention to their spiritual concerns ; and therefore he took occasion, from this dispute between the brothers, to warn his hearers against covetousness, one great cause of contentions in the world. He observed, that an eager solicitude to procure temporal possessions is absurd; since the largest property will not prolong our lives, or render them truly comfortable.

He then showed the fatal tendency of an immoderate attachment to present things, by a very striking parable. A person is described as receiving a vast augmentation of fortune by the fertility of his ground, and intent upon making the most of his substance.

He proposed to erect more capacious granaries, in which his increasing store might be secured, and flattered himself with the prospect of affluence, ease, and sensual indulgence, for many years. Having attained the summit of his wishes, he determined to retire from the hurry of business, and take all the enjoyments which his wealth could furnish. Who would not have pronounced him a wise and happy man? But his schemes of pleasure and earthly felicity were suddenly broken; and, in the midst of his plans for the gratification of his animal nature, he was summoned away into the presence of an angry God. He was condemned in the court of heaven for the most egregious folly, and his soul was required to enter upon a far different state of existence; while his boasted possessions were consigned to others, not being able to protract the execution of the sentence for one moment. Alas! how common the character! Our Lord declared that all those are in a similar situation who are anxious to become opulent, and wish to spend their substance upon themselves, without consulting the will of God, or regarding the necessities of others, and who at the same time are at no pains to obtain the far more valuable riches of divine grace.

Jesus proceeded to caution his disciples against an inordinate attention to worldly circumstances, as being inconsistent with the true spirit of the Gospel, as implying a distrust of God, and a comparative neglect of eternal things. On this occasion he repeated some sentiments, which he had before advanced in his sermon upon the mount, while he spake to the following pur-

pose :—“ I charge it upon you not to distract your minds with any secular cares, not even for the necessary provision of food or raiment. Will not He, who gave you life, supply you with the proper means of supporting it? The great God sustains the ravens without any contrivance on their parts; and will he forget you, who are so much more valuable in his sight? Besides, your utmost solicitude cannot effectually secure to you the least advantage: it cannot add, in any degree, to your stature or your age. Look also upon the inanimate world, and observe God’s minute attention to the very lilies, which, without their labour, he has decked with glorious ornaments, far surpassing the richest attire of the most exalted monarchs. Shall he, then, bestow such a profusion of beauty upon the short-lived flowers, and not furnish you with suitable apparel? You are the objects of his choice and love, though you are so backward to trust him. It is incongruous to your character to be intent upon such trifling concerns, and perplexed about your temporal support. This, indeed, may be the case with those who know not God; but you should leave the care of yourselves with the God of heaven, who is your Father, and who, as he perceives, can readily bestow what is needful for you. Only be you vigorously pressing towards his kingdom of glory; and, in addition to better, you shall possess those earthly blessings, which shall be expedient for you. In the prospect of that kingdom, go forth with courage, feeble and defenceless as you may seem: for, though you are a “little flock,” your Father has decreed, and will rejoice, to fix you in that blissful inhe-

ritance to which He conducts you. This hope, surely, will render you comparatively indifferent about your worldly property, and dispose you to part with it, if God shall call you to the trial. This expectation will kindle a feeling regard for the poor. They demand a share in your wealth, and you will not refuse it. You will be chiefly solicitous to secure to yourselves those treasures of which you cannot be deprived, and which will preserve their value and their lustre for evermore. These alone merit the affections of your hearts ; and if indeed you have chosen them for your portion, your thoughts and desires will be directed to that more than to any object."

Such manner of persons were the primitive Christians required to be : and is it allowable for modern Christians to be engrossed with secular pursuits, or principally attentive to the supports and comforts of the animal life? No : it is still as necessary as ever for the disciples of Jesus to be "spiritually minded," and weaned from this present world. If, then, our happiness be placed upon any temporal possessions or carnal gratifications, we have not imbibed the spirit of the Gospel : and this very criterion, we fear, will prove that many among us have never felt the real influence of that religion which is so generally professed. Let us beware for ourselves, and listen more carefully to our divine Teacher, whose continued exhortations call off our regard from all inferior concerns, that we may be waiting for our dismissal from the body, and seeking a suitable preparation for eternity.

Our Lord proceeded :—" You are stationed here

only for a short season, and on a particular service. You are, therefore, to be constantly expecting the return of your Lord, diligently attending to your proper work, with "your loins girded about," like men in readiness for a journey, or any vigorous exertions, and with "your lights burning," standing in a proper posture for the honourable reception of your Master. He may come suddenly; and therefore it is for you to be watching every moment, lest you be confounded at the intimations of his approach. The faithful and the active servant, thus persevering to the end, shall be gloriously distinguished when the Son of man appeareth."

Peter inquired whether the exhortation was designed for all, or for the Apostles in particular. Jesus replied, "Wherever the steward of approved fidelity and prudence shall be placed, if his Lord shall find him performing the duties of his office, and discharging his important trust, he shall obtain peculiar notice, and be advanced to a state of high dignity. But the careless and slothful servant, who, presuming upon the delay of his Lord's return, shall abuse the confidence reposed in him, and proceed to acts of oppression and intemperance, shall be awfully surprised in the midst of his sin and folly, and instantly destroyed without remedy. The man who clearly understands, and yet despises, his Master's will, shall feel the greatest severity; for the degree of future punishment shall be proportionate to the advantages and opportunities enjoyed upon earth, according to that equitable maxim, "Unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required."

The admonition should rouse us to a serious inquiry how we are acquitting ourselves in our respective places. Are we properly fulfilling our trust? If our Lord should appear, could we meet him with joy, or expect a favourable reception from him? Are we waiting for his coming? On the contrary, are we not negligent and treacherous, endeavouring to put away from us the thought of death and judgment? One thing, however, we must allow; we have had clear information in our duty: repeated calls and exhortations have been addressed to our consciences by religious books, by friends and ministers. Much, indeed, in various ways, has been committed to us; which, if we remain impenitent, will render our guilt more heinous, and our condemnation more aggravated.

Many might be looking for temporal advantages from the service of Jesus; and therefore, to obviate their mistake, he observed, "The most violent contentions will prevail, in consequence of my Gospel; yet, afflictive as these might be, I cannot but earnestly wish that they were already begun. I have myself extreme agonies to endure; and, though I see the whole before me, I long to enter upon the conflict, and feel the most ardent desires for the great event to be accomplished. Let my followers, therefore, be content to be opposed and hated; for my kingdom, though calculated to produce universal peace, will occasion the most unnatural and furious contests, because of the general prejudice and enmity against it. Many of those, who are united by the strongest ties of kindred, will now forget their obligations, and show a violent aversion

to such as claim their tenderest regard. This must be ascribed to the perverseness of men, who reject my doctrine in contempt of the clearest evidences. They are attentive enough to the common concerns of life, and discover much ingenuity in judging of the wind and the weather: but, ah! how stupidly unmindful of the surprising testimonies which God has given of his Son! Might not reason itself have led them to a more consistent determination? Is there any one liable to be convicted of an offence, for which he may suffer the severest penalties of the law, who will not be disposed to seek reconciliation with his adversary, while any favourable terms can be obtained? Give diligence, then, to procure forgiveness with your offended God, before he proceed against you and summon you to judgment, when nothing but rigorous justice can be looked for, and the everlasting punishment due to your iniquities will be inflicted."

Let us seriously attend to these declarations of our Redeemer. The effects which he foretold have taken place: furious and bloody persecutions have been raised against his faithful disciples; and even to this day these persons are generally opposed and hated by some of their nearest relatives. Let us not, however, be intimidated by the prospect of any difficulties in his service, but, while we contemplate his courage and zeal in meeting death itself for our sakes, let us cheerfully follow. We blame the stupidity of the Jews in their obstinate rejection of the Messiah; but do we discern the character, and unfeignedly submit to the authority, of Jesus? O, let us gladly accept his media-

tion, that we may not come under the wrath of Almighty God, as we have deserved, nor be cast into that prison, from whence there can be no deliverance !

Some of our Lord's audience acquainted him with the terrible slaughter of certain seditious Galileans, whom pilate had put to death, even while they were offering their sacrifices.* But, without passing any judgment on their case, he endeavoured to turn the attention of the people to their own perilous situation, representing them all as equally in a state of ruin, and exposed not merely to temporal calamities, but to eternal perdition, without an entire change and renovation. Those who are destroyed suddenly, and by any singular affliction (as the Galileans, and others who had been killed by the fall of the tower of Siloam), are often considered as offenders of the most atrocious kind, marked out, by the visitation of an angry God, as monuments of his peculiar vengeance. Jesus, however, has here taught us not to decide against them in so rash a manner, or to set ourselves above them, but seriously to remember our own danger, and the absolute necessity of our conversion. He solemnly declared, twice together, " Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." Is this awful assertion sufficiently regarded ? Do not many draw the most uncharitable conclusions against others, and presumptuously flatter themselves on their supposed comparative excellence ? It is allowed that persons of a very profligate character have incurred the divine displeasure, and must be reformed ; but those, who have been regular in their conduct, cannot bear to

* Luke xiii. 1, &c.

be ranked upon a level with them, or believe that there is any need of deep contrition for themselves. This is indeed a fatal delusion: since all inherit a natural depravity, all must be renewed and sanctified; to those, who are not, salvation is impossible.

To impress them with a sense of their danger, Jesus delivered a parable. A fig-tree, planted in a well-cultivated soil, disappointed the owner's wishes for three successive years. As it produced nothing, it cumbered the ground. Its foliage, unaccompanied with fruit, was no compensation for the pains and expense of the proprietor, who therefore directed it to be cut down. The servant to whom the care of the trees was committed requested that it might be spared one year longer, till further expedients were tried; and then it was agreed, that, if it still continued barren, it should be destroyed as utterly hopeless. The instructions hereby conveyed are obvious. It is, surely, a reasonable injunction, that those who are placed in the church, under the culture of religious means and ordinances, should bring forth fruit unto God. But, ah! how many, even in such a favoured situation, remain unprofitable, and therefore must necessarily be displeasing to God! Through the intercession of his Son, or the prayers of his ministers, he may graciously delay his threatened vengeance; but the time of his patience is limited, and, if repeated warnings produce no good effect upon them, the stroke of justice must fall: they shall feel the weight of his indignation.

As Jesus travelled through Galilee, he attended the public worship of the synagogues on the sabbath.

In one of these assemblies, a poor unhappy woman, who had been bowed together by infirmity for eighteen years, excited his compassion; and instantly, without any solicitation, he restored her to health and vigour. Such a miraculous display of power and benevolence should have drawn forth praises from every tongue. But the ruler of the synagogue objected to it with indignation, as if it had been a profanation of the sacred day. Jesus, however, convicted him of the grossest hypocrisy in his pretended zeal for God, and defended his own conduct, in relieving this afflicted creature, from the attention which they all paid to their very cattle on the sabbath. Acts of mercy, we observe, as well as those of necessity, are not prohibited as an infringement of the holy rest. His enemies, therefore, were ashamed of their opposition; and the common people were the more attached to him for his wonderful operations. On that occasion he repeated the parable of the grain of mustard-seed, and that also of the leaven, in both which he represented the gradual and extensive enlargement of his spiritual kingdom, notwithstanding the resistance it should meet with. The hatred and violence of men shall not frustrate the counsel of God. His Gospel shall spread; and its blessed influence shall be felt and acknowledged through all the nations of the earth.

Our Lord proceeded from one city and village to another, directing his course to Jerusalem. In every place he scattered the good seed of divine truth, diligently improving the short time which now remained for him in the world. Upon the road, as it should

seem, a question was put to him by one of the company, " Lord, are there few that be saved ?" The inquiry was probably made through vain curiosity, which Jesus never gratified : and, therefore, instead of giving a direct answer, he thus addressed himself to the consciences of the people, exhorting them to be earnestly solicitous for their own salvation, rather than to indulge any subtle speculations about that of others :—

" The path to heaven lies through a strait gate, which is difficult of access, and your entrance may be resisted by numerous enemies. Be not, however, discouraged ; but contend for admission in the most resolute manner, and break through every obstruction. Many, who are totally indifferent about eternal life, or refuse to go in the only appointed way, will shortly find that the door is finally and for ever barred against them. It will then be too late to implore the divine mercy. Though they cry ever so importunately, " Lord, Lord, open unto us," the great Master of the household will reply, " I know you not." He will not admit the plea of their former high privileges or honourable situation in the church ; but dissemblers, formalists, and all who die in impenitence, shall be covered with terrible confusion, while the Judge shall disown their boasted relation to Him, and shall pronounce with awful majesty, " Depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity." Inconceivable anguish, remorse, and despair, shall overwhelm many of those, who gloried in their near connexion with the most eminent saints of God, when they shall see themselves for ever separated from their society. The unbelieving Jews shall behold the de-

spised Gentiles, from the remotest corners of the earth, enter into glory, while they shall be eternally thrust out. Great numbers of those, who may now be thought the furthest from God, shall attain a state of peculiar exaltation in my kingdom; and not a few, who are here distinguished above others by their religious advantages, shall then be marked out, for their contemptuous abuse of them, by the severest vengeance."

Does not the solemn admonition excite an alarm in us, who are placed in the Christian church, and favoured with an evangelical ministry? Let us not presume upon our external privileges, but consider how much is to be done. Let us be roused from our stupor; for "it is high time to awake out of sleep." If we be distressed by the fear of finding the door barred against us, let us now look unto Jesus, and cry, with all the strength and vigour of our souls, "Lord, Lord, open unto us," and our application will infallibly succeed.

On the same day on which our Lord had delivered the exhortations last mentioned, intelligence was brought that Herod, the governor of the country, was determined to destroy him. This was said with an intention of intimidating him from prosecuting his labours in those parts. But Jesus could not be terrified; and therefore he replied, by a message to the crafty and persecuting prince, that, in spite of all his schemes, he would proceed with his work, performing the most miraculous and benevolent operations a little longer; that very shortly he should finish his course; and yet that he should lay down his life, not in Galilee, where

he then was, but in Jerusalem, the grand seat of persecution. The example teaches us not to be dismayed, whoever may threaten or oppose us, in the proper execution of our office. Let us faithfully attend to our respective duties, and persevere in them, though surrounded by dangers. We shall walk but a few days more ; and the God whom we serve will protect us till the end of our present appointment be answered. O that we may close our labours honourably, and then, like our Lord, " be perfected !"

After observing that he must perish in Jerusalem, he was led to reflect upon the heinous guilt, and approaching desolation, of that murderous city, and broke forth into the most tender and affecting lamentation over it. Jerusalem was the city where the blood of many prophets and holy men had been shed ; the city which had scornfully rejected the gracious offers of the Saviour, repaid his services of love with cruelty, and even then meditated his destruction ; yet, abandoned as it was, Jesus expressed the deepest sorrow for its miserable state. He declared that God, in righteous judgment, was about to lay waste the place with the most awful calamities, till the wretched inhabitants should learn to value and long for their promised Messiah, though they despised Him, who sustained that character.

What forbearance, kindness, and compassion, do we discover in the character of the Redeemer ! Still he possesses the same bowels of mercy. Long time does he strive with sinners, using one expedient after another to promote their salvation. According to his own

description, he still proposes to gather them as a hen gathers her helpless brood under her wings, to protect and nourish, and to afford them security and comfort in himself. But, alas! how many proudly spurn at the offer! And what can be expected to follow from their base conduct but final and remediless perdition? Yet, even then, he abandons them, as it should seem, with difficulty, charging their destruction upon themselves: "I would,—and ye would not."* May we learn wisdom from the wretched infatuation of those who have perished in their unbelief! May we all therefore, with one heart and voice, welcome the Saviour, who brings with him pardon, peace, and eternal life! Let us take up our words now with unfeigned faith, and we shall speak them with confidence and joy at the last day, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord!" Amen.

* See also Hos. xi. 8.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. XXVI.

Jesus dined with a Pharisee on the sabbath—healed a dropsy—inculcated humility and a regard to the poor—delivered the parable of the great supper—warned his followers to prepare for suffering—vindicated his attention to sinners by the parables of the lost sheep—the piece of silver—and the prodigal son.

IF our review of the life of Jesus affect us as it ought, it will not only produce in us an admiration of his excellency, who is “fairer than the children of men,” but regulate our conduct and sanctify our dispositions. While we “behold the glory of the Lord,” we shall be “changed into the same image.”* Let us pray continually that we may feel this influence from his example; so shall we be followers of the Lord, “not in word, neither in tongue, but in deed, and in truth.”

Jesus was travelling through Galilee towards Jerusalem; and, probably in that journey, a principal Pharisee, a man of rank, invited him to dinner.† It might seem an act of condescension in a person of emi-

* 2 Cor. iii, 18,

† Luke xiv, 1, &c.

nence to ask or admit such a guest into his house as appeared to be greatly his inferior. But a favour was conferred on the Pharisee rather than on Jesus. The most exalted monarch might have said with reason, "Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof." It was an instance of "the meekness and gentleness of Christ," that he vouchsafed to converse freely with sinful creatures, and discovered no distance in his behaviour. He readily gave his company to those who desired it; not indeed for his own pleasure, or the convenience of eating with them, but for their benefit. He "sought not his own profit, but the profit of many, that they might be saved."

As this occurred on the sabbath, we infer that religion does not require us to refuse all intercourse with others throughout that day. There may be proper occasions for friendly visits in some parts of it; but we should be careful to maintain a spirit and conversation suitable to its grand design. The example of Jesus cannot be adduced in vindication of that vanity and dissipation by which it is so generally perverted and profaned.

It should seem that many persons were assembled at the Pharisee's house, and such as were not well affected to Jesus; for "they watched him." Perhaps the invitation was given, not from kindness, but malevolence, on purpose to pass the most invidious censures upon him. How odious the disposition of those who are eagle-eyed in scrutinizing the conduct of others, and who rejoice to find any real objections against them! And yet you, who are the faithful disciples of Jesus,

are frequently placed in the midst of such malignant observers. Their attention is fixed upon you, with a view, not to commend what is laudable, but to discover and expose your faults, that so they may approach that holy name by which you are called. You, therefore, should be vigilant as well as they, that their wishes may be defeated, and themselves ashamed, when they shall see the wisdom and consistency of your deportment.

A person who was present, afflicted with the dropsy, excited the compassionate regard of Jesus. He, however, knowing that the lawyers and Pharisees before him were seeking for an accusation against him, appealed to them whether it would be any violation of the sabbath to perform a cure on that day. They were unable to reply, while he, unmindful of their censures, instantly restored the diseased man to perfect health, observing, that, however they might object to this act of mercy, they would none of them scruple to relieve their very cattle in distress. They felt the force of his words, and were confounded. Thus, likewise, it frequently happens that the enemies of religion are suddenly restrained and abashed by a serious remark or a solemn address to their consciences. Let us not, therefore, be deterred by their insidious designs, but persevere in the path of duty.

Jesus not only justified himself, but reproved them for their pride and love of precedency. He took notice that they were all ambitious of the highest seats at the table, and argued that such a contention for places of honour was extremely disgusting, and that it would

be much more becoming to give way to others. He showed that an arrogant spirit is odious, and, while it claims respect, incurs contempt ; and, on the contrary that a modest and humble deportment, which seems to shun observation, invariably conciliates esteem. This is the case in the common intercourse of men ; and it holds true, if we apply it to our temper and conduct towards God. “ He resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble.”* Who will not allow that it is incumbent upon us, in his presence, “ to take the lowest room ?” Yet how little are the apostolic injunctions regarded or understood, “ In lowliness of mind, let each esteem other better than themselves :” “ in honour preferring one another !”†

Jesus continued to deliver the most serious instructions and admonitions to the company before him. With a reference, no doubt, to their general spirit and practice, while he addressed himself to the person who had invited him, he condemned the custom of providing sumptuous and costly entertainments merely for their relations and opulent neighbours, and recommended an attention to the relief and comfort of the afflicted, in all their various distresses. How much extravagance prevails in supporting magnificent tables for the reception of those who want nothing ! The large sums which are thus expended serve only to feed our own pride and sensuality. But what a sordid parsimony is shown in contributing to the support of the truly necessitous, who can make no returns ! Those, however, are blessed, who, from faith and love un-

* 1 Pet. v. 5. † Phil. ii. 3. Rom. xii. 10.

feigned, "deal their bread to the hungry, and bring the poor, that are cast out, to their houses."* The Lord of heaven will consider himself as their debtor, and will render them an abundant recompense in the great day of retribution.

The solemn discourse of Jesus, probably, left a good impression on the audience. One of the company, at least, expressed his approbation and desire of continuing the subject, by remarking the exceeding felicity of those who shall be admitted to the sacred feast which God has provided in his kingdom. Possibly he might not understand or really wish for the happiness of which he spake; however, in order to excite both him and all present to a serious examination of their state, Jesus showed that the most gracious offers of it are made to mankind, and rejected with contempt by the greater part.

He represented, in a most interesting and affecting parable, a large and rich supper prepared for the accommodation of many guests. The Lord God, by the Gospel of his Son, has furnished the grand entertainment here referred to, in which every thing is set before us that can give delight or vigour to the soul. How valuable and exquisite are the blessings of which it consists! They are such as these: pardon, peace, holiness, and fellowship with God, even upon earth; divine light, strength, and consolation, communicated to the soul; an infallible promise of an admission into heaven, and a present foretaste of its joys. Who does not ardently desire to partake of the sumptuous ban-

* Isa. lviii. 7.

quet? It is a royal feast; and no want of provisions need be apprehended, for there is a bountiful and inexhaustible supply.

Many guests are invited, and an urgent message is sent, pressing their immediate attendance, since the necessary preparations for their reception are now completed. Thus the call of mercy is given, by the publication of the Gospel, to an innumerable company, who are earnestly exhorted not to neglect the gracious offer. It was first, and in a particular manner, addressed to the Jews; but the language is the same to all who hear it, from one age to another, "Come, for all things are now ready." Every thing is done, on God's part, which is proper and requisite for the securing of eternal salvation to our guilty race. But their consent is indispensable; and is it possible that this can be refused?

Those, who are bidden, are unwilling, on various pretences, to accept the kind invitation. Different excuses for their absence are framed; all weak and ridiculous. It is alleged that they have other engagements; and yet these are such, as, though not wrong in themselves, are trifling, or may be deferred, and need not prevent their attendance. Their very pleas, therefore, show a marked contempt of the entertainment. Thus, alas! the proposals of the Gospel are rejected with scorn. Men pretend, indeed, to apologize for their conduct. Secular cares and occupations, or domestic comforts, so totally engross them, that it is supposed impossible and unnecessary for them to pay any regard to their spiritual concerns. Such reasons,

surely, cannot be admitted in their vindication; nay, rather, they will condemn them, as proving their hearts to be alienated from God. Their employments may not be sinful, but highly proper, if pursued on right principles, and in due subordination to the care of their souls. Yet, probably, more persons perish eternally through an immoderate and unseasonable attention to things which are right in themselves, than by gross and avowed iniquity.

After the refusal of those who were first bidden, the invitation is enlarged. The servant is charged to bring in the poor and disabled; and, as sufficient room still remains for the accommodation of many more guests, he is dispatched in search of those who are dispersed abroad in the most forlorn and wretched condition. Even these, the refuse of men, are importuned, by the most cogent arguments, to enter, and satisfy their wants; that so the sumptuous preparations may not be lost. The Jewish nation despised their own mercies; but “through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles.”* To us, who are “the ends of the earth,” is the gracious call addressed. Though we are, in a spiritual sense, “poor and maimed, and halt, and blind,” we are allowed to partake of the rich banquet. Nay, though we be sinners of the most abandoned character, fitly represented by those who lie in “the highways and hedges,” we are permitted, and even pressed in the most forcible manner, to come. Many have already complied with the invitation; but “yet there is room”

* Rom. xi. 11.

for thousands more; and it is the Lord's determination that his house shall be filled.

The Master is incensed when his kindness is rejected, and he resolves, in displeasure, that those, who have shown such contempt of him, shall be excluded from his entertainment. This is an awful admonition indeed. The Lord of heaven and earth considers himself as insulted when his Gospel is made light of. Do we not dread his indignation? Why, then, do we trifle with his messages of mercy? Possibly they may never be renewed. He may instantly bar the door against us, and declare "Those men shall not taste of my supper." Since he has done this against the Jews, let us fear for ourselves, "lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief."*

Great multitudes still attended Jesus in his progress; and yet probably but few of them were attached to his cause from right principles. It is to be expected, that, amongst the numerous professors of the Gospel, there will be many of a suspicious character. All, therefore, should be exhorted to examine of what sort their religion is, from what motives it was first taken up, and whether they so value it as to be willing to suffer for its sake. To this purpose our Lord addressed the vast concourse of people who followed him:—

"If any man would enter into my service, he must renounce all worldly views and expectations. Whosoever consents not, on every necessary occasion, to go in opposition to his nearest friends and relatives, so as to appear even to hate them; whosoever is averse to

* Heb. iv. 11.

give up the most beloved enjoyments, and lay down life itself, in my cause, cannot be acknowledged as my disciple. Severe as the trial may seem, if he refuse to combat difficulties, to endure extreme hardships, and to persist in the path which my example or command may point out, he possesses not the temper of mind indispensably requisite for my servants."

"You, therefore, who profess an attachment to me, should deliberate well what you do; for you are undertaking an arduous and important business. Like one who is about to raise an edifice, you should make the proper calculations, that you may know whether you can finish the work which you are planning. The inconsiderate builder, whose labours are disappointed and suspended, is deservedly exposed to the derision of others. Or, as a prince, who meditates an hostile expedition against a neighbouring power, you should inquire if you are sufficiently prepared to meet your enemy. Is your force such as to give you a reasonable hope of success? It were better not to provoke an attack than hastily rush into the battle, and there to betray your weakness and cowardice. Rather than fall in the conflict, or basely desert your standard, remain in your present state, bad as it may be, and prefer a dishonourable peace to a destructive war."

"Thus you should examine whether you possess what my service demands: for, if you be unwilling to renounce the dearest objects in life for my sake, you cannot be ranked amongst my people, or receive any advantage at my hands. With an unsound profession of religion, you would resemble the "salt which has

lost its savour," and then, instead of answering any valuable purpose, as those who are "the salt of the earth," you would be useless, or a nuisance in your place, fit only to be cast out with contempt. Let every one who desires instruction attend to the solemn admonition."

Such was our Lord's address to his followers: and in its main argument, it is perfectly applicable to ourselves. The same bold and disinterested regard to him, which he then required, we also must possess. With the same holy jealousy and circumspection we should search and try our hearts. Are we his disciples indeed? What motives or expectations induced us to assume that character? Or, what is our present plan? Are we determined to give up every thing which stands in competition with Christ, that he may be our "all in all?" If otherwise, let us not act as dissemblers with God, lest we be rejected with abhorrence, as far more detestable than those who never made pretensions to sanctity.

The foregoing exhortation may seem harsh and severe to persons of a tender spirit; and those who are oppressed with guilt may be ready to infer that Jesus forbids, rather than encourages their application. But the following representation will obviate such a conclusion.

Many publicans and sinners came about him, showing great eagerness in listening to his instructions.* Nor did he disdain their company, or drive them from him by denunciations of vengeance, as if their case

* Luke xv. 1, &c.

were desperate. His condescending attentions and compassionate addresses were calculated to inspire them with humble hope towards God. These, however, displeased the Scribes and Pharisees; and they insinuated that he countenanced the profane and licentious. A similar objection is often urged against his ministers, when those who have been dissolute and abandoned are drawn to hear them. It is thought a reproach to the Gospel that it gives the most gracious invitations, and proposes a full and free forgiveness, to men of this description. But this is, in fact, its brightest glory, though too dazzling for carnal eyes to behold; and, accordingly, they turn away from it with disgust. Those, especially, who expect and claim a preference for their own supposed goodness, quarrel with the greatness of the mercy, and generally pretend a vast concern for the interests of morality, which, they rashly conclude, are likely to sustain an injury. In opposition to them, we believe it to be for the honour of Christ that "he receiveth sinners," even those who are marked out as peculiarly infamous for their numerous and aggravated offences. He welcomes, pardons, sanctifies, comforts, protects, and saves them. This is extensive, rich, and distinguishing grace indeed, and it should induce us more than ever to love, and praise, and trust him. He acts in a way worthy of himself: and those, who know his character, admire that very part of it which enrages the Pharisees.

He vindicates his own conduct, showing its propriety, and the extreme unreasonableness of the objections urged. This he did in three parables, all tend-

ing to illustrate the abundance and the freeness of his mercy, and each an emblem of the favourable reception which penitent sinners, though they have been accounted most hopeless, shall meet with from him. Let the transgressor, then, who is ready to sink into despair, be encouraged to lift up his eyes to this dear Lord and Saviour, who will not disdain to help him.

A striking appeal is made to our own feelings, and the general practice of mankind. Where is the person, who, losing only one out of a numerous flock of sheep, will not be at pains to search after it, and express a peculiar pleasure in its recovery, especially if it had appeared unlikely to be found? Our own miserable state is here exhibited. We have wandered far from the fold of God, and, though exposed to want, and the assaults of furious and malicious enemies, are unwilling of ourselves to return. But our attention is directed to the compassionate care of Jesus, under the character of "the good Shepherd," who, with much labour to himself, seeks and rescues the lost sheep, and takes it under his immediate protection. Nor should this be considered as a trifling incident, a matter of indifference. Every instance of the conversion of a sinner is an important event, and will communicate the highest delight to those who understand the worth of an immortal soul. Jesus himself exults, and all the blessed inhabitants of heaven express a rapturous joy, as if their own happiness were increased, when any, however profligate, is "turned from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God." They triumph in such a restoration, as being a peculiar acquisition, more than

in the continued felicity of established believers, whom they looked upon as already secure. This is a grand display of pure and disinterested benevolence in the celestial world. Who shall object, or be tortured at the sight, but the malignant prince of darkness, and they who bear his image?

Another representation, to the same purpose, is given us in the case of a poor woman, who, after much anxiety and diligent search, finds the piece of money, which she had lost out of her little treasure. This appears a prize peculiarly valuable, and yields her more satisfaction than all her other stock, which she considered as a safe possession. Such is the generous concern which Jesus feels for the perishing souls of sinners. In whatever instances his grace proves effectual, so that they, "who sometimes were far off, are made nigh" to God, he rejoices that he has done and suffered so much for their salvation; and the holy angels, who are called to witness the momentous change, are filled with wonder, love, and praise. And shall we presume to censure him for this exalted kindness? Rather, shall we not take occasion from it to admire the Shepherd, who came in search of us, and adore the ever-blessed Lord of all, who spared no pains for our recovery?

The subject is still further illustrated in another parable. A story is related, containing circumstances to which no hearer can refuse to listen; and the simplicity of the narrative is such, as not only engages the attention, but interests and affects the heart.—The younger of two sons, after receiving his proportion of fortune, is represented as departing from his father's house, the

restraints of which were irksome to him, and going to a distant country. There the thoughtless youth squandered away his substance by intemperance. He was soon reduced to the most infamous servitude, and to such a degree of wretchedness, that he was on the point of perishing by hunger. A lively emblem of our sinful conduct, and its miserable consequences! A particular reference to the Gentile world, and to the case of profligate characters, might be designed. But we have all resembled this foolish man, in disliking the strictness of true religion, casting off the fear of God, and departing from him, with a full determination to gratify the desires of our hearts. And have we found the happiness which we expected in our own ways? Alas! far otherwise. The effects of our apostacy have been distressing and ruinous in the extreme. Like the poor prodigal, we are become destitute, enslaved, and contemptible. In such a state we can procure nothing to support and satisfy the soul, and we stand on the brink of destruction. How pitiable the case! And it is the more pitiable, as few are sensible of their degradation and wretchedness.

A change, however, took place in the unhappy youth. "He came to himself," as if he had been till that time intoxicated or insane; and then reflecting on the comfortable situation he had left in his father's family, and the misery, disgrace, and danger, which he had brought upon himself, he formed the resolution of returning to his insulted parent. He remembered his former pride, rebellion, and wickedness; and his purpose was to confess his aggravated guilt, and earnestly

to request the shelter of his father's roof, though it should be in the lowest capacity of a menial servant. He proceeded, without delay, to execute his plan. In this stage of the history we perceive the pleasing character of a true penitent. Then only does a man "come to himself," or enjoy the proper exercise of his reason, when he feels convictions of his folly and baseness, and discovers strong desires of restoration to the divine favour. And what other expedient can the awakened sinner adopt, but to flee to his offended God, to pour out his soul with unfeigned contrition, and to lift up his voice to Heaven with incessant cries for mercy? Though he dare not be confident of acceptance, it will be proper, surely, to try the effect of an humble application; and, if he cannot ask for the privileges of a child, let him earnestly solicit an admission into the family on any terms. But his former practices, principles, and connexions, must be renounced, and a return not only resolved on, but instantly attempted.

The kind and forgiving father beheld the son at a distance; and, as if he had forgotten his past ingratitude and perverseness, without waiting for his nearer approach, he ran with open arms to embrace him. The penitent youth began his intended confession; but the indulgent parent, as if impatient to relieve his distress, interrupted him, prevented his request, assured him of his love by the strongest tokens, and immediately commanded all his household to give the most expressive demonstrations of their joy, inasmuch as his dear child, who had been considered as irretrievably lost, was restored to life and happiness. What does all

this teach us, but that God can pardon more freely and extensively than we could have conceived? He views with delight the very beginnings of repentance, the first efforts of a sinner towards a return. He listens with satisfaction to his broken cries for mercy, and, instead of upbraiding him with any part of his accumulated guilt, he hastens to confer every mark of affectionate regard. The angels of heaven also, as well as believers upon earth, are required to exult in that event, from which the most glorious effects are produced. Such is the loving-kindness of our God! Who then shall despair of acceptance, or hesitate to apply unto him? "He will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy: he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing."*

But one of the family refuses to participate in the general happiness. The elder son is disgusted at the attention shown to his brother, who had been so licentious and abandoned, and, while he boasts of his own dutiful subjection to his father, complains that he meets not with such a preference as he might have expected. The father condescends to argue with him on the unreasonableness of his objections, even allowing the justice of his claims, and still maintains that it was every way proper and expedient to express the highest delight in the recovery of a child, who had been given up as lost. This part of the parable contains a striking reproof of those proud and captious adversaries, the Scribes and Pharisees, who reproached the Saviour for receiving sinners. Here their own perverseness is ex-

* Zeph. iii. 17.

hibited ; for while they were incensed that any notice should be taken of the most dissolute characters, or at least that they should be admitted to favour upon the same terms with themselves, and while the Jewish nation in general could not bear "that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, and of the same body," they most exactly resembled the elder brother. And do not many, in modern times, betray a similar aversion to the rich grace of the Gospel, which is extended to the most heinous offenders ? There are those who value themselves on the uninterrupted regularity of their conduct, and are extremely disgusted that no peculiar compliment is paid to their excellence, and that others are put upon a level with them. But are they not wrong, even on their own principles ? For, granting all that they can possibly urge in their behalf, no injury will be done to them by the kind and affectionate manner in which every penitent is received. Let them make good their claim, and they will be treated with suitable respect. But let them not refuse to rejoice, when those, whose cases appeared most hopeless, are taken into the number of the children of God, and heirs of everlasting life. The Lord God will vindicate his own glory in dispensing his mercy freely. Let us not peevishly object to any part of his plan of redemption, but drop all our angry prejudices against it. Let us implore forgiveness for ourselves, as those who deserve to perish ; and under such a conviction we shall wonder, not that others are saved, but that we, who "were enemies, are reconciled to God by the death of his Son."

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. XXVII.

Jesus delivered the parable of the unjust steward-- showed the use of money--reproved the Pharisees-- described the case of the rich man and Lazarus-- exhorted to avoid giving offence, to forgive injuries, and maintain faith--cured ten lepers--foretold the destruction of Jerusalem--described the nature of acceptable prayer by the parable of the importunate widow, and that of the Pharisee and publican.

JESUS directed his steps towards Jerusalem, with a full view of all his sufferings before him, and even with an earnest desire to enter upon them. He was yet in Galilee; and during his progress through that country he continued to exercise his ministry, labouring to diffuse the knowledge of the truth, and to give unequivocal proofs of his divine character. While we contemplate him persisting in his work with diligence and cheerfulness to the very last, may we learn to persevere in the most vigorous exertions for the glory of his name, till we finish our course! What though the cross lies before us? Let us imitate the holy example of the Saviour, and we shall follow him to his kingdom.

Publicans and sinners, we have seen, attended on his preaching, and many Scribes and Pharisees also were present at the same time. In the audience of them all, and with a view to their instruction, he addressed his disciples, pointing out in what manner worldly possessions are to be improved.* He spake, as usual, in parabolical language, and represented a rich man calling his steward to account, that he might dismiss him for unfaithfulness in his trust. The guilty servant attempted not his own vindication, but showed extreme solicitude about his future support. He contrived to make friends to himself by falsifying his books in favour of the various debtors of his lord, that so they might be disposed to entertain and assist him when discarded from his office. The expedient was dishonourable and base, but it was ingenious ; and, therefore, his master, who could not but condemn the injustice, admired the prudence of the man, who had so artfully provided for his own subsistence. We are here taught to consider ourselves as the stewards of God, who is the great Lord and Proprietor of all. At no distant period we must give up our accounts, and be removed from our present post. What, then, shall we do ? Have we not been negligent and treacherous in the discharge of our trust ? Have we not wasted our Master's goods, devoting that to the purposes of pride and sensuality, which God claims for his own ? How shall we answer to the accusation ? Have we no fears about our future condition ? Or, what schemes have we formed for own security in the day of our calamity ?

* Luke xvi. 1, &c.

Jesus observed, at the close of the parable, that they whose hearts are fixed upon this world are much more attentive to their secular interests, than those are to their spiritual and eternal concerns, whom God hath taught to know their duty and happiness. Surely there is abundant cause to reprove the remissness of Christians among ourselves; for we perceive in them but little of that contrivance and assiduity for the welfare of their souls, which men in general discover for the attainment of the low and trifling objects of the present life.

Jesus, also, improved and applied the parable to the following effect:—"Riches, which commonly deceive the expectations of their possessors, and often are subservient to the purposes of sin, may yet be employed to great advantage. By a proper use of them, you may conciliate the esteem of those whose friendship is most valuable. Many, whom you have instructed, relieved, visited, and cheered, and to whom your bounty has endeared you, may go before you to heaven, and, upon your removal from the place you now fill up, may stand ready to welcome you to the same blissful habitations, where they will confess their obligations to you. A very small share, indeed, of wealth, may be committed to your care; but your religious principles will be evinced by your behaviour in the lowest station, so that we may safely infer from it what would be your conduct in a higher. If you act as unfaithful stewards in the disposal of your temporal substance, worthless as it is, how can you expect to be intrusted with those blessings which are of real value? And if you trea-

cherously misapply what is not strictly your own property, but only put into your hands for the benefit of others, you have no reason to believe that God will confer upon you a certain and everlasting possession. How necessary is it, then, that you make a deliberate choice whom you will serve. You will be supremely attached either to God or the world; and, in proportion as you esteem the one, the other will be disregarded. It is impossible that you can live in subjection to two masters, whose demands are so directly opposite."

The Pharisees heard the solemn admonition; but they treated it with scorn, because the love of money had the ascendancy in their hearts, and the doctrine of Jesus struck at the root of that vile principle. The ministers of God, like their great Exemplar, must expect to be derided by those whose practices and tempers they condemn: yet they should not, on this account, keep silence. Jesus reprov'd the hypocrisy of the Pharisees in the most awful terms, declaring, that while it was their object to preserve appearances before men, God perceived their inward dispositions, and that He looks with abhorrence on those things which short-sighted mortals may admire. Would to God that every proud and covetous pretender to piety, whose reputation stands high in the church, would seriously consider the tremendous truth!

The Pharisees professed a high regard for the Mosaic institution. Our Lord, therefore, remarked to them, that this was designed to continue only till John the Baptist appeared; that in him God began to open

the new dispensation, and to set up the kingdom of Messiah ; and that of the benefits and blessings of that government, which he its harbinger proclaimed, men of all characters were now anxious and eager to partake. Still, he observed, the ancient law did not fail, as if it had not answered the end ; for it received its completion in the Gospel, which fulfilled the types and prophecies, and enforced the moral commands. In some points, particularly with respect to the sacred and inviolable bond of marriage, they themselves explained away or perverted its meaning, and he reproved them as guilty of adultery in divorcing their wives for every trifling cause of disgust.

Let us beware of the spirit of the Pharisees, and not be satisfied, as they were, with certain external observances in religion. It is possible, we see, that those, who pretend to be very zealous for duties, may be lamentably defective, and allow themselves in gross violations of the divine precepts. Let us inquire, then, how far our principles and practices agree. The highest veneration for the law should dispose us, not to reject, but embrace, the Gospel. They both come from the same God, and harmonize in the same glorious plan. The Christian revelation is, indeed, the perfection of every preceding economy, and by this especially God establishes the kingdom of his Son. Do we wish to secure its blessings? Then we are required to exert all the faculties of our souls ; for “ every man presseth into it.” The faint desire, the unoperative resolution, will leave us short of heaven ; the possession of it is not to be gained without a holy violence.

Before the same audience, and in order to enforce the foregoing admonitions, Jesus proceeded to deliver an affecting parable. He described the future miseries which will follow a life of carnal indulgence, though pleasant for a season, and the everlasting blessedness to which the servant of God shall be admitted, however afflicted upon earth. A rich man is represented, expending his fortune merely for the support of an elegant appearance and a luxurious table. His plan was, to allow himself every gratification which his income can afford; but, while he consulted only his own wishes, he considered not the necessities of others. A poor beggar, named Lazarus, incapacitated for any labour by a diseased body, was placed before his door, imploring relief. This distressed object was neglected, except by the dogs, who licked his sores, as if they were more compassionate than their master: but even this circumstance showed his calamitous situation, since he was covered with ulcers, which were exposed to the open air, and at the same time he could hardly obtain the smallest crumbs for his subsistence. Death, however, soon put an end to the sufferings of the one, and the enjoyments of the other; and then how different their condition! Lazarus, who was dear to God, notwithstanding his extreme indigence, was conducted by a company of heavenly spirits to a distinguished abode in the kingdom of bliss and glory. The rich epicure might have the parade of a pompous funeral, but his grandeur followed him no farther. He was cast into hell, and there consigned to the torment of everlasting fire; while the view of Lazarus's happiness and exaltation

increased his own misery. He petitioned that the once-despised beggar might be sent to alleviate the excruciating agonies which he endured from the fierceness of the flames ; but this could not be granted. Deliverance from his pain, and even the smallest abatement of it, was denied : an impassable gulf separated him from the society of the blessed ; and he, who had before enjoyed every delicacy, could not then obtain a drop of water to cool his parched tongue.

Five brethren still survived him, and all trod in the very same steps. He begged therefore that a special messenger might be sent from the world of spirits to warn them of those extreme sufferings which awaited them. Perhaps he had been instrumental to their profligacy ; and the desire of preventing their destruction might arise from a fear of aggravating his torment. The request, however, was refused, on this ground, that the testimony of the inspired writers was sufficient for their conviction, and that those who rejected such an evidence would give no credit even to a witness rising from the dead.

The whole representation is tremendous, and yet most instructive. Who now will plead for a life devoted to pleasure and sensual purposes ? Who will presume to say there can be no harm in expending our fortune upon ourselves ; or that no bad consequences will result from the gratification of our wishes, provided our income will support it ? Our Lord has shown that by such a conduct the trust reposed in us is betrayed, the poor neglected, God forgotten and provoked, the soul debased and ruined, and a fire

kindled against us, which will “burn to the lowest hell,” and which never can be quenched. Will not “the sinners in Zion be afraid, and fearfulness surprise the hypocrites?” Ah! “who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?”*

We congratulate the faithful servants of God, though destitute as Lazarus. You possess a happiness beyond the reach of the world, of which no afflictions can deprive you. Though you can hardly procure the meanest fare or the coarsest apparel; and though, while your diseased bodies can scarcely endure the hardships of hunger, nakedness, and cold, you are the scorn of your opulent neighbours; yet we will call you blessed. Death, which strikes a terror into others, may inspire you with confidence and joy. For then you shall obtain perfect deliverance, and be “carried by angels into Abraham’s bosom.”

Is it supposed that stronger evidence is wanted to convince men of the dangerous tendency of sin? The sacred Scriptures declare it, with all the strength and clearness of which language is capable. The testimonies of departed spirits, who have entered upon the invisible world, are withheld from us, and we have no right to ask for them, or to conclude that they would be at all regarded by unbelievers. Let the word of God then be fairly consulted, and its decisions implicitly received, or else we shall soon feel those torments which we are unwilling to credit.

* Isa. xxxiii. 14.

After this interesting parable, Jesus addressed himself again to his disciples, suggesting certain cautions and directions for their conduct.* Some of these things had been said before, but their importance rendered the repetition expedient and needful. He warned them against giving any cause of offence to others, observing, that though, in such a world as this, among creatures so constituted as we now are, cases of that kind may be expected, yet they are attended with awful consequences. It is abundantly better to suffer any calamity, and even to be cut off by a violent death, than to bring a reproach on the good ways of God, or to occasion the meanest of his people to depart from them. In an especial manner, he exhorted them to beware of an angry and implacable disposition, since this would be peculiarly disgraceful to the Gospel, and declared that their forgiveness of injuries should be unlimited. How necessary for ourselves is this solemn counsel! "Ye that love the Lord, hate evil:"† for inconceivable mischief may result from any wrong practices or tempers observed in your deportment. Many may be prejudiced against the truth, and some so staggered as entirely to renounce it, when they perceive that it produces so little influence upon you. A contentious and quarrelsome spirit is particularly unsuitable to your character; for, though frequent occasions of complaint may occur, you are to "suffer long and be kind," and thus to prove that the Gospel which you receive is a system of peace and love.

* Luke xvii. 1, &c.

† Psal. xcvi. 10.

The Apostles, it should seem, being affected by a sense of their great difficulties, and their inability to surmount them through the weakness of their religious principles, earnestly prayed unto the Lord that he would increase their faith. For, such is the efficacy of this grace, that it will bear up the soul against the severest trials, strengthen for the most arduous services, preserve in temptation, and sanctify our inward dispositions. But how frequently is it obstructed in its operations! If the near attendants and most honoured servants of Jesus lamented their deficiency in this respect, surely the most eminent believers now may with peculiar propriety exclaim, "Lord, increase our faith!"

Jesus reminded them that the least degree of it, though small as a grain of mustard-seed, will produce wonderful effects, and enable the Christian to perform duties, which would otherwise be as impossible as the transplanting of a tree into the midst of the ocean. Yet he taught them, after all their exertions, to assume no merit to themselves, but to acknowledge that their obedience to God in every point was no more than he had a right to demand, and that, as it added nothing to him, it gave them no claim upon him. According to this description, we all are the servants of Jehovah, the great and sovereign Lord, and should attend to our proper work till it be finished, not looking for our complete rest and enjoyment before we have done the business assigned us; and even then we shall deserve nothing. Surely a slight knowledge of ourselves will dispose us to confess that "we are unprofitable ser-

vants ;” nay, remembering what we are, we shall not be unwilling to own that we are miserable offenders.

Jesus continued to prosecute his journey to Jerusalem through Samaria and Galilee, and scattered blessings as he went. Near to a certain village, into which he was about to enter, ten unhappy persons, afflicted with leprosy, presented themselves before him. They stood, indeed, at a distance, as was required of them, lest others should be defiled by their loathsome disorder. It was not, however, too far for the voice of the suppliant. Having heard of the power and grace of Jesus, they implored his merciful regard. He looked on them with compassion, and instantly directed them to show themselves to the priests, who alone were authorized to decide when the malady was removed. They obeyed his word in the believing expectation of a cure, and, as they were going, were healed. The influence of our great Restorer of life and health extended to the remotest places, as well as to the objects immediately within his view. The same miracle was wrought upon them all ; but only one of them, it should seem, and he a Samaritan, was properly affected with it. He returned to proclaim the kindness of his Benefactor, and his own obligations to him. With admiring and grateful adoration he bowed at his feet, and with a loud voice gave glory to God. This instance of faith and love in a Samaritan, a stranger to the commonwealth of Israel, was a striking reproof to the rest. He, therefore, obtained the peculiar approbation of the Saviour, and was dismissed in peace.

Have we been the subjects of Christ's healing power? Has not the leprosy of sin spread its poisonous infection over our souls? And shall we not cry to him, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us?" Those, surely, who are restored by his grace, cannot but be thankful: yet, alas! none of them feel so lively a sense of his goodness as they ought. Is there one out of ten, who gives glory to God with proper energy and zeal? And is not ingratitude, on such an occasion, most detestable? You, who have experienced deliverance by the power of Jesus, return to praise him; and commend him to the notice and esteem of others, while, with astonishment and love, you declare what he has done for you.

Perhaps he was arrived at the great city, or, at least, was in the neighbourhood, when the Pharisees inquired of him at what time God would establish the kingdom, of which he had spoken so much. He replied, that they were deceived about the nature of this kingdom; that it would not be attended with such external pomp and grandeur as to excite general observation; but that, being inward and spiritual, it existed in the hearts of his people. He suggested also to his disciples, that they would soon be longing for his appearance, in vindication of their despised cause, but warned them not to be misled by impostors, who should arise in great numbers. He declared, indeed, that after his passion, then approaching, he would manifest himself in a most awful manner, to take vengeance on his enemies; and that, coming suddenly and terribly as the lightning, he would confound and destroy them. He fore-

told that many would be cut off in the midst of their business, their gaiety, and sensuality, as in the days of Noah and of Lot, when thousands perished, in the former case by the flood, and in the latter by fire and brimstone from heaven. And, as this tremendous desolation should be accomplished so quickly, he directed his disciples to flee for their lives, at the very first commencement of the troubles, without attempting to secure any of their possessions. He warned them to remember Lot's wife, lest they also, through an attachment to worldly things, should be involved in the general ruin. He predicted that in this public devastation the most painful separations would be made, the nearest friends divided, the most intimate connexions broken; so that, where two persons should be united in the closest bonds, the one should be rescued by a peculiar act of grace, and the other left to perish.

It was inquired where the terrible destruction would take place; and our Lord replied by a proverbial expression, that the eagles would be gathered to the carcass. This seemed a plain intimation that the Romans, whose ensigns bore the image of the eagle, should be the instruments of that calamity, and that they would fly as those ravenous birds to their prey. It might also be intended to imply, that, wherever obstinate sinners are marked for ruin, the judgments of God will find them out, and hasten with an unerring aim to accomplish their perdition.

The awful subject will be afterwards resumed. For the present, we observe, that the prophecies of Jesus, which clearly referred to one signal event, were all in

due time exactly accomplished. Jerusalem was given up to entire desolation, the unbelieving Jews perished miserably, and the Christians, obeying our Lord's directions, obtained a memorable deliverance. Are we not, then, here instructed, that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God?"* And should we not be solicitous to provide a refuge for ourselves, against that day of more terrible calamity, when "the vials of the wrath of God shall be poured out" upon all impenitent sinners, and there shall be no escape? Jerusalem was destroyed for its contempt and rejection of the Gospel; and, if God be still jealous for the honour of his Son, what has Great Britain to expect? O may we know the time of our visitation, and embrace the offers of mercy which are held out to us in the Saviour!

We inquire, then, with serious concern, of all to whom the word of truth is preached, Are you members of the kingdom of God? Is it set up "within you?" It is declared to be "righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost."† Have you understood what these blessings mean, so as to feel their efficacy in your own hearts? If not, you are as much strangers, in reality, to the character of Jesus, and as certainly obnoxious to the divine vengeance, as the unbelieving Jews. O, flee from the tremendous storm, while yet there is a possibility of escape! Be willing to make use of the appointed refuge, that, when the destroying Angel unsheaths the sword, you may be protected from the stroke of justice.

* Heb. x. 31.

† Rom. xiv. 17.

Probably with a view to encourage his disciples under the prospect of their approaching difficulties, Jesus exhorted them to pray, and to urge their requests with unceasing ardour.* Let us attend to his counsel: "Men ought ALWAYS to pray," at all times, and in all the various circumstances of life. Though many difficulties attend the practice of the duty, and our petitions seem to be rejected, we are "not to faint." Our fears may suggest that "God hath forgotten to be gracious," and that it were vain to hope for his mercy; yet we are here taught to renew our applications with fresh vigour, and "give him no rest" till he vouchsafe to grant us deliverance and comfort.

The efficacy of such continued fervour in our addresses to God is exhibited in a short parable. A poor distressed widow, under great oppression, earnestly solicited the interference of a magistrate in her behalf, that she might obtain justice. He, being destitute of every good principle both toward God and man, refused for some time to undertake her cause; but at length he consented, merely that he might be freed from the trouble of her importunity. Jesus has directed us to draw the proper conclusion from this little history. The Lord God may seem regardless of the incessant cries of his afflicted people for a considerable season; but still they should persevere in their ardent supplications, and expect his gracious interposition. Like holy Jacob, they should wrestle with him, and say, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me."

* Luke xviii. 1—14.

Then will he rescue them from the oppression of their spiritual enemies, and satisfy the desires of their souls. Yet, great as this encouragement is, how few are animated by it ! Do not some appear so disheartened, and so " faint in their minds," as to grow remiss, and almost abandon their hope ? Thus Jesus lamented, that, upon his coming, he should find but little faith on the earth. And, should this be the day of his visitation among ourselves, we fear that the number of firm and lively believers would be proved to be small indeed. Ah ! why do we distrust his promise ? Or, if we maintain our dependence upon it, why do we give way to so many distressing apprehensions ? Why are we so backward to the duty of prayer ; so cold and languid in the performance ? Surely we treat the Lord as if we thought that he would not be true to his word.

Another parable, addressed to those who boasted of their own goodness, and looked down with contempt upon others, instructs us with what temper of mind we should make our approaches to God. We may draw near with confidence, in reliance on the Saviour ; but not with presumption, as if we had a claim upon him, on the ground of our own merit. We are taught to bow before him with the deepest humiliation and abhorrence of ourselves, confessing our iniquity, and imploring forgiveness through his free and abundant mercy, as revealed in the Gospel. This is represented in the case of two men, a Pharisee and a publican, who went to worship at the temple. Their principles and dispositions were widely different ; and very different also was the effect of their prayers.

The Pharisee stood by himself, with much self-sufficiency, as if he should be polluted by coming near the publican. His devotions, if such they may be called, contained not one petition; and, though he pretended to thank God, his object was to compliment himself, while he described his own excellency, and recounted the various services he had performed. He alleged that he was far better than the generality of mankind; that he had avoided the gross sins in which many others lived, and which might be charged upon the notorious character then present; and that he had also been exact in all ceremonial observances. Such was the detail of his goodness, such the only foundation of his hope towards God. And was not this "sacrifice an abomination unto the Lord?" Yes, a proud spirit is peculiarly odious to him; and he hath determined "that no flesh shall glory in his presence." But are not many, under a Christian profession, worshipping with the temper of the Jewish Pharisee? Let his prayer be translated into modern language, and it would describe precisely the sentiments of numbers among us. We have many, who compare themselves with others, who boast of their virtue, their freedom from scandalous crimes, and their strict performance of certain customary rites. But what shall we say? Shall we not remark, as before, that, so long as they exalt themselves, their most specious offerings, whether of charity or devotion, are offensive to God?

Another character, however, is here exhibited, and that of an acceptable worshipper. The publican, or Roman tax-gatherer, whose former life, it is probable,

had been stained with many enormities, was compelled under the terror of an awakened conscience to humble himself in the presence of God, and to deprecate his vengeance. He stood at a distance from the sanctuary, and with eyes cast down upon the ground, thus expressing his unworthiness to draw near or look up to God. Nor was such demeanour the only evidence of his feelings. Smiting upon his breast, through extreme anguish for his accumulated guilt, and confessing himself a sinner obnoxious to justice, without offering any plea in his own favour, he prayed, that, if it were possible, God would extend his mercy to him. To such a contrite penitent as this, however flagitious his conduct may have been, the promises of the Gospel are addressed, "Let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."* This the publican found; he went down to his house in peace, having obtained acceptance with God. How instructive, how animating, is the example! It is recorded for our encouragement; and the declaration is added, to revive the heart of all those who are ready to despond, "He that humbleth himself shall be exalted." For this abundant grace, indeed, we are indebted to Him, who "died for the ungodly," and whose "blood cleanseth from all sin." Our application to God must be made in his name, and in dependence on his merits. But even the interposition of Christ will not avail us, unless we feel that "godly sorrow which worketh repent-

* Isa. lv. 7.

ance," and that deep humiliation which the publican expressed. We may have been preserved from gross offences; but, if we be truly sensible of our guilt, we shall not be unwilling to be considered on a level with the worst of characters, in the point of our acceptance with God, nor will any other prayer suit us so well as that which is here provided, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

J E S U S C H R I S T.

SECT. XXVIII.

Jesus, attending at the feast of dedication, gave sight to a man born blind—revealed himself to him, when excommunicated—described himself as the Door, and the good Shepherd—declared his union with the Father, and miraculously escaped from being stoned.

JESUS had now taken his leave of Galilee, and arrived at Jerusalem. There he attended at the celebration of a certain festival, which is supposed to have been kept in remembrance of the purification of the temple by Judas Maccabeus.* This was an institution only of human authority; but he did not on that account neglect it, and he has taught us by his example to pay a serious respect to those observances which tend to the advancement of religion, even though they be not established by the divine command.

In such a world as this, objects of wretchedness present themselves on every side: but we may learn from Jesus not to look on the distressed without feeling the tenderest emotions of compassion. As he passed through the streets of Jerusalem, he beheld with merciful re-

* John x. 22. 1 Mac. iv. 59. Joseph. Antiqu. B. xii. ch. 11.

gard a poor beggar, who had been blind from his birth.* The disciples, taking notice of the unhappy case, proposed a question of curious speculation. They asked whether the calamity was not to be considered as a peculiar judgment from God, for some heinous transgression committed either by the man or his parents. Possibly they entertained the idea of a pre-existent state, and supposed that the sufferings of this life are punishments for former sins. The Jews, at least, are said to have imbibed that absurd notion from the doctrines of certain Heathen philosophers.

Jesus, however, without entering into a subtle disquisition upon the case, declared that the affliction was appointed, not as a judicial visitation for any remarkable offence, but that the mighty power of God should be displayed by its miraculous removal. He further observed, that his time of service in this world, which he knew to be very short, must be diligently improved, in order to promote the great end of his mission; and that he should continue, during his abode here, to give light to them that were in darkness. Let us make the application to ourselves. We, who are sinners, should always consider that we deserve to bear distinguishing marks of the divine indignation. Wheresoever we perceive a poor sufferer, oppressed by heavy calamities, let us not curiously inquire into his crimes, but attend to our own, which merit a like, if not a severer, visitation. It may reconcile our minds to the most painful afflictions to remember what our Lord intimates, that they may be designed to promote the

John x. 1, &c.

praise and glory of God. Let us not forget, how soon our day of labour and of usefulness will be closed, that we may exert ourselves with vigour for the benefit of others. If the Saviour shone as "the light of the world," what are our obligations? Are we not bound to fulfil the purposes of the life which is given us? Shall we depart to the awful reckoning before these are answered? If we would imitate our great Exemplar, we must not trifle away the few remaining moments in sensuality or supineness, or omit any one opportunity of rendering assistance to our fellow-creatures.

Jesus not only attended to the cries of the distressed, but in some cases granted relief where it was not solicited, as in the instance before us. We observe, too, that, though all his miracles were illustrious, they were performed in different ways. In some a word or a touch sufficed; in others certain means were made use of, but such as magnified his mighty power. He anointed the man's eyes with clay: but this, it must be allowed, seemed more likely to take away than communicate sight. He then commanded him to wash in the pool of Siloam; and instantly, upon this being done, the cure was accomplished. The efficacy, however, should not be ascribed to any peculiar virtue in those waters, but to Him, whom by their significant name they typified, "the Sent" of God. He alone, who ordered this singular expedient, could render it successful. The same, we may remark, is evident with respect to his other appointments. The ordinances of his church are, indisputably, weak in themselves, and unable to impart any blessing to the soul. But he is

pleased to confer grace upon those who frequent them in obedience to his directions, and in dependence on his promise. Let us therefore conform to his institutions with the simplicity of unfeigned faith, and his power will be therein displayed for the relief of all our spiritual necessities.

The miracle was manifest, and it could not but engage the public notice, as the man whose sight was restored was generally known. All were astonished, but some were enraged; in consequence of which, pains were taken to disprove the fact, or by some means to cast an odium upon Jesus. This malignant opposition, however, tended to confirm the evidence, and publish it the more extensively. In like manner, modern infidels, by their hatred of the Gospel, and assiduous attempts to invalidate its testimony, do really advance the cause which they mean to injure; and the more they resist God, the more his truth is established, and they themselves are confounded.

The man was summoned before the sanhedrim, and closely examined concerning the change he had experienced, which he described with the most artless simplicity, and from which he declared that he considered the author of it as a Prophet. This occasioned a division in the council; some, with hypocritical sanctity, pretending that Jesus had profaned the sabbath, because he had performed the miracle on that holy day and therefore that he could not be of God; while others were constrained to acknowledge, from the evidence before them, that he could not possibly be an impostor. Some unfairness or collusion being suspected, endea-

vours were used to discover the trick. The man's parents, therefore, were called, and strictly questioned. The fact, indeed, they openly asserted, and yet, through the fear of excommunication (which all were threatened with who should confess Jesus to be the Messiah), they dared not avow their own convictions, but referred their examiners to the testimony of their son.

He was again interrogated by the rulers; and, while they with vehemence and bitterness reviled the Saviour as a worthless and profane wretch, the poor beggar ventured to plead his cause with confidence. He maintained before them all that the miracle was undeniable, and the conclusion from it reasonable, that Jesus must have received his commission from Heaven. This provoked them the more; and instantly, without any other charge of guilt, they passed the very severe sentence of excommunication upon him.

Whether, now, shall we most pity, the condemned person, or his judges? Ah! how odious their conduct, how miserable their case, who, with incontestable evidence before them, still hardened their hearts, and determined not to be convinced! He, though destitute of the advantages of education, and in a great measure ignorant of the real character of Christ, dared to act agreeably to his conscience, and refused to depart from his testimony, whatever he might suffer. We ask, then, Where are those, who have courage enough, in the face of opposition, to vindicate the character of Jesus? Can you speak of any benefit which you have received from him? Though unable to maintain an argument against subtle disputants, can you declare that he has

communicated light to your mind, and say, as the poor beggar, if you can add no more, "One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see?" By such a simple evidence as this, many an unlettered peasant has pleaded the cause of Christ with great success, and sometimes to the confusion of the most learned adversaries. But it may expose you to reproach and bitter persecution. Be it so. What have you to fear, while you stand up for the honour of the Saviour? It is a service of which you should not be ashamed, and in which you need not dread any consequences. Do not, therefore, shrink from it, or, as the man's parents, put it off to another; but come forth, and avow yourselves the disciples of Jesus, whoever may, on that account, exclude you from their society. He, whose interest you espouse, will manifest his favourable regard to you in due season.

The poor outcast, it should seem, understood but little of Jesus; yet, being faithful to his convictions, he obtained further information. The Saviour sought after him, that he might reveal himself to him. Upon being asked, therefore, "Dost thou believe on the Son of God?" he confessed his ignorance, but showed, at the same time, that he was a serious inquirer after the truth, and eagerly desirous of instruction. Accordingly, no sooner had Jesus explicitly declared himself to be that exalted Character, than he cried out, with a holy rapture, "Lord, I believe;" and, to testify his unfeigned submission and dependence, he bowed down in devout adoration of him. Thus he received a double cure, and exhibited, by the change wrought both

in his body and soul, unquestionable proofs of the power and grace of the Redeemer. How seasonable was this manifestation to the excommunicated man, while he suffered under the severe and injurious sentence! The Lord will administer the necessary support and consolation to those who seek him in sincerity; and he will select the most suitable time and method for that purpose. Fear not, therefore, you who are faithfully devoted to him, whatever may come upon you in his service. We need not say, when the profane world turn away from you with scorn, but even when your dearest friends cast you off, for the truth's sake, he will prevent you from sinking under the trouble, and perhaps he may then favour you with peculiar discoveries of his salvation. In this confidence the royal Psalmist triumphed, "When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up."*

But should the question be proposed to us individually, "Dost thou believe on the Son of God?" what answer could we return? Are not many, who assume the Christian profession, as far from the faith of Christ as if they had never heard his name? If, however, with a teachable disposition, we ask, how we are to conceive of him, or what regard is due to him, he himself will instruct us.

In addressing the man to whom he had given sight, he conveyed both information and encouragement while he observed, that one grand design of his appearance was, to communicate the light of life to all who feel and lament that they are destitute of it. But he

* Psal. xxvii. 10.

added, that he came also for judgment, as well as mercy, to expose their folly, who boasted of their own understanding, and to seal them up in ignorance, who were too wise to be taught. Certain of the Pharisees, it should seem, were present at the latter part of this declaration: and, considering themselves as charged, by an oblique reference, with spiritual blindness, they were disgusted. It must needs be offensive to the pride of those, who have acquired a reputation for learning and discernment, to be treated as intellectually dark, and having the same need of divine illumination as the most illiterate. Jesus, therefore, warned them, that they could not plead in excuse for themselves the want of information, and that a conceit of their own knowledge chiefly kept them in unbelief, and greatly aggravated their guilt and condemnation. This, surely, may furnish a forcible exhortation to us, that we “lean not unto our own understanding,” and that we pray earnestly not to be given over to a judicial blindness, but, by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, to discover “the truth as it is in Jesus.”

Our Lord continued his address, with a particular view to those false teachers, who rejected him.* Speaking in parabolical language, he declared, by a solemn asseveration, that whosoever enters into the fold any other way than by the appointed door, is to be considered as an injurious and destructive intruder. He described the real shepherd, as approaching by the regular access, which alone can be allowed, and gaining immediate admission. To such an one the care of the

* John x. 1, &c.

sheep is intrusted: he watches over them with a tender regard to their different cases and necessities; and they acknowledge him as their guide, supporter, and defender. But they will not pay the same respect to him who is not thus connected with them, and yields not a due attention to their concerns. This was indeed an awful reproof of the Pharisees, who pretended to instruct the people, and yet understood not the only instituted method of salvation; and it was an intimation, that, whatever character they assumed, the true members of the church would not submit to them, but turn away from them with disgust. Yet they saw not the drift of the parable; and therefore Jesus spake in plainer language to the following effect:—

“ I myself am that Door to which I referred: and it is necessary that every one, who would be a teacher of others, should be properly acquainted with my mediatorial office, and cordially devoted to my service. There have been those who have urged the same claims before, and many have presumed to mark out for their disciples a different course from that which I prescribe; but they were deceivers and usurpers, whose object was their own gain and not the good of the flock. The faithful people of God, however, have always discovered the ruinous delusion, and refused to be led by their influence. I am the only way of admission into the church; and he, who approaches to God in a real dependence upon me, shall be protected from all assaults of enemies, and shall find abundant support and comfort for his soul in the rich provisions of the Gospel. The arrogant intruder into the sacred function of

the ministry is a destroyer and murderer of immortal souls. But the purpose for which I am come is to bestow salvation in a larger measure than has ever yet been known upon the earth."

"I, therefore, perform the office of "the good Shepherd," and am the very Person described by the ancient prophets under that title:* my people shall enjoy security and happiness, through my affectionate care for them; and I will render them every attention and service which the most vigilant and compassionate shepherd can yield to his flock. Circumstances of peculiar danger may occur, which will try the strength of his regard for the sheep. In such situations, the man who has no property or concern in them will not expose himself for their defence, but leave them to be dispersed and devoured by every beast of prey; while the real owner, who feels an attachment to them, will stand by them in all extremities, and hazard his safety that he may ward off the assaults of the destroyer."

"This is the character which I sustain for the benefit of my redeemed ones: and as a mutual love subsists between me and them, similar to that which the Father and I bear to each other, so, in the sincerity and fervour of my affection, I cheerfully give up my own life, to rescue them from perdition. My flock also extends beyond the limits of your nation: there are those among the Gentiles, however hopeless they may appear, who shall obey the call, and be incorporated into my church, that all believers may constitute

* Isa. xl. 11. Ezek. xxxiv. 23, xxxvii. 24. Mic. v. 4.

one society, under the care and protection of the same exalted Head. The Father himself is pleased with my attention to the welfare of my people, and with my voluntary undertaking for them. It is, therefore, our settled plan, and a part of the commission which I have received from him, that I should die, and rise again. Of my own accord I lay down that life, which I could easily retain against all the violence of men and devils; and by the same sovereign power I can resume it, since it is not possible that I should be imprisoned in the grave, contrary to my own will."

How interesting is the whole of this address ! Who among us can be unconcerned about an admission into the fold of God, or the only possible mode of procuring that admission? Have we, then, diligently inquired for this appointed way; and do we consent to make use of it? It is more especially incumbent upon the teachers of religion to examine their principles. As they would dread the condemnation of the ancient Pharisees, and the odious appellation of "thieves and robbers," they should seriously consider with what motives they assumed the sacred character. Have they been actuated by an unfeigned regard to Christ? Is he the sole ground of their dependence? And is it the grand object of their ministry to display his grace, and exalt his glory? Very mischievous indeed are the effects which result from such persons undertaking to instruct others as are themselves ignorant of the salvation of God. Many, many precious souls, are deluded to their eternal ruin. Let us pray, therefore, that "the church, being al-

way preserved from false apostles, may be ordered and guided by faithful and true pastors, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

“The good Shepherd” can never be unmindful of his flock. Let us contemplate this description of him till we feel an increasing strength and liveliness of faith and hope, of love and joy. How amazing is that compassion, which induced him to take notice of our wretched case! How should that depth of humiliation and suffering, to which he submitted for our recovery, endear him to us! How should that tenderness of regard, with which he provides for all the various cases of his people, encourage our trust, and inspire us with confidence! But are we indeed “the sheep of his pasture?” Have we heard his voice, recalling us from our wanderings; and are we now content to abide in his fold? In dependence on him, do we go in and out, and feed upon the rich pastures of his grace? “All we, like sheep, have gone astray;” let us “now return unto the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls,”† and pray that others also, though far off, may be brought nigh, and made one with us in him.

Our Lord’s declarations produced different sentiments in his hearers. Some turned away from him with disgust, and in a contemptuous manner derided him as a demoniac and a madman, unworthy of any serious attention. But there were those who judged more favourably of him, both from the doctrines he advanced, and the miracles he wrought. Thus, also,

* Collect for St. Matthias’s Day,

† Isa. liii. 6. 1 Pet. ii. 25.

the faithful preaching of the Gospel generally creates a division. It is no uncommon thing for men to speak evil of what they understand not, and to vent their enmity against the zealous advocate for Christ, by scornful reproaches similar to those which were cast upon Him. And yet, such is the force of the truth, that, even in the midst of much opposition, some will be so impressed with it, as to exert their influence in its support. Let us "take heed how we hear," and examine for ourselves, without being biassed by the objections of others.

Jesus was walking in the portico which surrounded the temple, probably soon after his preceding discourse, when many of the Jews came about him, though with no friendly disposition. They desired a still plainer declaration from himself, whether or no he was the Messiah; and it is likely that they wished for it, as a ground of accusation against him. Jesus, therefore, reproved them for their unbelief, in disregarding his former claims, and referred them to his works, for a full demonstration of his divine character. He showed their baseness in continuing to reject him, notwithstanding such accumulated evidence. It was a conduct which clearly proved that they belonged not to that favoured company, the sheep of his flock, all of whom acknowledge him as their Leader and Commander, receiving his doctrines, and obeying his directions. These, however, reproached by men, he affirmed to be the objects of his peculiar notice, and secure, under the protection of his almighty arm, from the assaults of their most powerful enemies. He has redeemed them

to himself; and engaged to rescue them from every danger, and conduct them to the possession of eternal life. He added, that the omnipotence of the Father is pledged for their defence, since he and the Father "are ONE," not in design only, but in nature and perfection, the same infinite and uncontrollable Being. As Jehovah, therefore, cannot be overcome, his people are invincible.

How clear and express the declaration! Mysterious we allow it to be; for we pretend not to comprehend the divine essence, or to explain in what manner this union can subsist. But we maintain the real and proper deity of the Saviour, on the authority of this infallible word; nor dare we make any difference or inequality, where the Scriptures have forbidden it. We confess our obligation to "honour the Son, even as we honour the Father," and derive the strongest hope and consolation from the important doctrine.

This high claim gave great offence; and so it has ever done; but the furious opposition of men ought not to deter us from the cordial reception of the truth of God. The Jews took up stones to stone him, as they had done on a former occasion.* What a tremendous sight was this! Sinners rising up with murderous rage against the Saviour, and arming themselves for the destruction of "the Holy One of God!" Why did he not crush them in a moment, and consume them in their iniquity? Or why does he bear with our perverseness? Only because he is "the Lord, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy."†

* John viii. 59.—Sect. 23.

† Psal. ciii. 8.

With astonishing composure and mildness, he stood to expostulate with them on their unreasonable conduct in recompensing all his benevolent actions with such barbarity. They pretended, indeed, a religious zeal; for they considered him, by what he had said, as "making himself equal with God." Now, had they mistaken his meaning, is it not in the highest degree improbable that he should suffer them to continue in such an error, without contradicting it? Yet in his reply he did not renounce, but confirmed and vindicated, his claim.

He argued, that kings and rulers were in their Scriptures called "gods,"* as representatives of Jehovah; but that he was infinitely superior to them, and came, in a character peculiar to himself, immediately from the highest heavens; and therefore that he ought not to be treated as a blasphemer for asserting his proper title and dignity. In support of it, he solemnly appealed again to his works, which he called the works of his Father, being such as none but Jehovah could perform, and maintained from them what he had before affirmed, that he and the Father are one. This, surely, was clear and decisive; nor can there need a comment to deduce the Godhead of Christ from these repeated declarations. The Jews understood him as advancing this very doc-

* Psal. lxxxii. 6. It is supposed by some that magistrates obtained this high appellation only as types of the Redeemer, and as an intimation that He would really be very God in himself, whereas they were styled so merely with a reference to him. Accordingly, our Lord's argument has been expounded with a view to this sense; and the interpretation certainly deserves serious consideration.

trine, though they determined, through their pride and ignorance, to reject it; and therefore they renewed their attempts to destroy him. By a miracle, however, as on other similar occasions,* he escaped from their violence, since he had yet a few months longer to continue his labours on the earth.

A proper opportunity is here offered us to warn those of their danger who oppose the divinity of the Son of God. Beware, lest, sinning as the Jews did, you “fall after the same example of unbelief.” If their spirit and conduct were so odious, can yours be acceptable, to him? Your error, if persevered in, will be destructive; for you cannot possess right affections towards the Saviour, nor yield him that reverence and submission which he demands, unless you acknowledge that he “is over all, God blessed for ever.”† For the present he bears with your petulance and folly in resisting his claims; but at length he will arise to vindicate his right, to the everlasting confusion of all his enemies.

We have only to add, that when Jesus withdrew from this persecution at Jerusalem, he retired to a distant part, even beyond Jordan, where John had formerly exercised his ministry. There many resorted to him, having been prepared, as it should seem, by the testimony of the Baptist, to receive him. These therefore, without hesitation, believed on him, while the great and learned at Jerusalem rejected him with scorn. Thus the sin of some persons may eventually become the salvation of others. “The kingdom of God,”

* Luke iv. 30. John viii. 59.

† Rom. ix. 5.

when taken from those who oppose, is given to such as will thankfully submit to it. Happy the people beyond Jordan, who were favoured with the presence of the Saviour, because they knew the time of their visitation! Let us fear for ourselves and our country, lest our perverseness should provoke him to depart from us; and therefore let us yield all serious attention to the word of truth, which we hear. O Lord, withdraw not the Gospel of thy grace, nor the influence of thy Spirit, from us! Here fix thine abode, and make us willing and obedient in the day of thy power. May we be added as faithful members to thy church on earth, and conducted to thy heavenly kingdom, there to behold thy glory, and praise thee as one with the Father, world without end! Amen.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. XXIX.

Jesus answered inquiries about divorces—showed a tender regard to little children—replied to a young ruler—warned his disciples of the danger of riches—delivered the parable of the labourers in the vineyard—hastened to Jerusalem to suffer—cured two blind men near Jericho.

THE enemies of Christ, even while they seem to prevail, are subservient to his purposes : by their opposition to the truth, they are eventually the cause of its more extensive promulgation. Thus, we have seen, when Jesus was driven away from Jerusalem, the people beyond Jordan received the benefit of his ministry. To them he imparted his blessings with a liberal hand ; for he was followed by great multitudes, whom he instructed in the mysteries of his kingdom, and healed of their various bodily diseases.*

Hither also the malice of the Pharisees pursued him. They came with an intention of drawing him into some difficulty, or of prejudicing the people against him. They pretended to consult him on the subject of divorces, and asked whether it were allow-

* Matt. xix. 1—12. Mark x. 1—12.

able for a man to dismiss his wife for every trifling reason. He knew their malevolent designs, and yet condescended to answer their inquiries. He referred them to the original institution of marriage, as delivered in their own Scriptures, with which, he argued, the separations so prevalent among them were totally inconsistent. To this it was objected, that Moses had countenanced those divorces by an express law for the purpose.* Jesus replied, that a permission of that kind had indeed been granted to their nation, "on account of the hardness of their hearts," which might have produced worse mischiefs, but that such a toleration was repugnant to the first appointment of the sacred union.

The disciples resumed the subject in private, when he solemnly declared, that, if either of the parties so bound together put away the other (excepting only for the cause of unfaithfulness), and entered into a fresh connexion, it was adultery in the sight of God. The representation appeared so severe, that they judged it advisable to decline an engagement which could not be annulled. But this was a wrong conclusion: for our Lord observed, that, though various reasons might lead men to celibacy, it should not be imposed upon any, and that those, who preferred it with a view of devoting themselves more entirely to God, should possess peculiar grace, suited to the circumstances of that state.

This may seem an uninteresting topic to some readers: but the licentiousness of the present age renders

* Deut. xxiv. 1.

it in an especial manner necessary. "Marriage is honourable in all ;"* yet few, we apprehend, proceed to it under the influence of right motives, in the fear of God, or with a real regard to their spiritual welfare. A sudden and capricious attachment, the gratification of libidinous desires, worldly expectations or convenience, are the grounds on which most persons connect themselves together ; and in such cases, as there is no firmness of virtuous principle, the bond of union is more liable to be broken. Disappointments ensue, disgust arises, a freedom of intercourse becomes irksome, a separation is eagerly wished for, and consequences, most destructive to religion and society, take place. How frequent are such instances among us, particularly in what is called fashionable life ! So numerous are the applications for divorces to one branch of our legislature, as to constitute no small part of the deliberations of that august body. The many examples of contention and impurity, which are thus brought to light, stain the records of Parliament, disgrace our profession of the Gospel, and expose our nation to the judgments of an incensed God.

How much care and circumspection, then, are necessary in the choice of a partner, with whom we are to spend our days ; if we would attain real and abiding happiness in such a connexion, it is indispensably requisite that our inclinations be regulated according to the will of God, that we seek his direction and blessing, and aim at his glory. Those, also, who are bound together by the marriage covenant, should maintain a

* Heb. xiii. 4.

constant vigilance over themselves, lest, by any part of their spirit and conduct, they should excite disgust in each other, and render their union painful. Let them learn to "bear one another's burdens," and, by the exercise of patience, forbearance, and love, promote their mutual comfort and advancement in the road to heaven.

The dread of inconveniencies and trials should not, however, deter men from that which is God's own institution, and for which our very nature is formed. Few, we fear, continue single on real principles of religion : few possess the grace which is necessary for that state. The celibacy of many, it is evident, leads to licentiousness ; and therefore it is their sin and reproach. While they boast of their liberty, and rove at large for the indulgence of their passions, they are hastening their own perdition, and with much assiduity laying snares for the unwary, whose bodies and souls are sacrificed for a vile and momentary gratification. What aggravated guilt is here !

During our Lord's continuance in the same neighbourhood, the inhabitants regarded him with such veneration, that many presented to him their tender offspring, who were not capable of profiting by his instructions, requesting his solemn benediction and devout intercessions for them.* The disciples would have prevented it, and put them from him, unwilling that their Master's time should be occupied with infants, as he had other more important business to employ him. Jesus, however, showed much displeasure

* Matt. xix. 13--15. Mark x. 13--16. Luke xviii. 15--17.

at their officious interposition, and commanded that even the youngest children should be allowed a free access to him, inasmuch as the kingdom of God should consist of such members. He declared, also, as he had done before, that no person can belong to that holy community, who is not brought to a simplicity of disposition resembling that of a little child. With the greatest complacency, therefore, and most amiable condescension, he took them up in his arms, and pronounced his blessing on them.

This occurrence may seem trifling, but it is replete with instruction. It should endear the Saviour to us, when we observe such decisive proofs of meekness and compassion of his character. And, since Jesus allows and invites those of tenderest age to come unto him, affirming them to be capable of being received into his kingdom, shall we forbid their admission into his church, and exclude those whom he has not excluded? The argument drawn from this passage in favour of infant baptism, though not direct, appears conclusive; for why did he show such a regard to infants, but because they were the proper objects of his care and love, and might partake of his grace? Parents, therefore, may be encouraged to present their offspring to Christ, and entreat his kind attention to them. They may solemnly devote them to him in his covenant by the initiating ordinance of baptism. That rite is to the father of a Christian family what circumcision was to the father of a Jewish. We believe that our whole house will be an acceptable offering to him,

and rejoice that "the promise is unto us and to our children."*

The representation here given seems particularly suited to engage the notice of our youngest readers, and to such we would apply it. Inconsiderable as you may be thought in the world, you are not beneath the Saviour's regard. Let nothing, then, keep you from his arms, which stand open to receive you. While you hear him say, "Suffer them to come unto me, and forbid them not," be encouraged to have recourse to him, whoever would prevent your approach. Cast yourselves before him, and implore his blessing. Surrender up your hearts, in willing subjection, that he may attach them to himself, and accomplish in you the purposes of his mercy. Though your years have been few, you stand in need of redemption through his blood, and the sanctification of his Spirit; nor will his grace be denied you, while you wait in humble faith and fervent prayer before him.

As he was departing from the place in which the last occurrence happened, a certain person came running to him, evidently with much eagerness, and with profound veneration, acknowledging him as a divine teacher. He kneeled down at his feet, and desired information from him on a subject of all others the most important.† "Good Master," said he, "what good thing shall I do, that I may inherit eternal life?" Here, then, was a candidate for heaven, of a most pro-

* Acts ii. 39.

† Matt. xix. 16, &c. Mark x. 17—31. Luke xviii. 18—30.

misgiving appearance. He was young, yet not addicted to sensual pleasures, for he attended with great exactness to the duties of morality, and discovered a serious concern about his future state. He was a ruler, a magistrate of some consequence, and possessed of considerable wealth. Yet, unlike the generality of those in high life, he applied to Jesus, not with a disposition to cavil, but, as it should seem, with a desire of being instructed in the way of salvation.

The case was hopeful; and, from such a view, we might have been ready to conclude that the man was a real convert. But a little experience will teach us not to be precipitate in our judgment, nor to rest with implicit confidence in any favourable appearances. Jesus, who knew perfectly the bent of his mind, dealt with him in such a way as to show his true character. He inquired, therefore, why he had given him the title of "good," since it properly belonged only to God. He did not thereby disclaim it, or in the least imply that he possessed not the attributes of deity, but examined on what ground the amiable youth had so addressed him, and whether he had done it on a full conviction of his dignity. The ruler, probably, was elated with a conceit of his own goodness, and his ability to do every thing required; on which account, to detect his erroneous notions, and evince his deficiencies, Jesus referred him to the law, assuring him that he must keep the commandments, in order to attain eternal life. We cannot so interpret this declaration as to set aside the necessity of believing in the Son of God for salvation, or ascribe to man a power in himself

of yielding a complete obedience to his Maker. But there is a peculiar propriety in putting those, who boast of their own righteousness and strength, upon considering the extent of their duty. We exhort them to bring forth their best performances, that they may compare them with the appointed rule, and to try what their most vigorous exertions can effect. "Keep the commandments;" but let one precept as well as another be regarded, and that in the utmost extent, so as to regulate your inward affections no less than your outward practice. Such an unfeigned and perfect compliance is required from you at all times and in all circumstances, without weariness or interruption, even to your latest hour. Upon the least failure, you are rendered incapable of being justified by the works of the law, and, though decent and orderly in your conduct, can obtain forgiveness no otherwise than by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, through the blood of his cross.

This young person, not knowing himself and the defects of his obedience, presumptuously boasted that he had, from his earliest years, performed every duty enjoined in the second table, to which he was referred; and, in the vain confidence of his own sufficiency, he then asked whether any thing further could be demanded of him. Ah! how gross the darkness, how fatal the delusion, by which men are so exalted in themselves as to say, "I am innocent," or, "What lack I yet?" Jesus, however, looked with compassionate regard on the ruler, whose manners and disposition, in some respects, might be peculiarly engaging. But, as he resisted conviction in one way, he proved him in

another, requiring a special testimony of the entire submission of his heart to the divine will. "One thing," said he, "thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor; and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me." The strict injunction was more than the youth could bear, but not more than Jesus had a right to ordain: nor would those refuse to comply with it, who are truly sensible of their own demerit, and the worth of the Saviour. The merchant, who finds the "one pearl of great price," will sell all that he has, and buy it:* for he will say, "I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord."† Not so he, whom rank and fortune had ennobled. He was disappointed, grieved, confounded; and instantly betrayed what Jesus meant to detect by the trial here proposed, the secret insincerity of his heart. He gave up all further inquiries about the religion of the Gospel; "he went away sorrowful," mortified with the severity of the injunction, regretting his inability to comply, and, if unwilling to part with his pretensions and his hopes, yet still more reluctant to resign his present attachments. He withdrew, preferring the enjoyment of his large possessions to the grace and salvation of Jesus.

Ah! who can refrain from tears, on account of the promising youth thus departing from Christ, and at length, as we fear, perishing in sin? Yet similar cases frequently occur. We would ask all those, who seem desirous to learn the way to heaven, do you un-

* Matt. xiii. 46.

† Phil. iii. 8.

feignedly consent to the terms which Jesus requires? He does not, indeed, say to you, "Sell whatsoever thou hast;" but he will certainly call you to make some painful sacrifices, as an evidence of your regard to him. You must, at least, be ready to relinquish the dearest objects in life, if he shall so appoint; nor are any of his disciples exempted from the obligation of taking up the cross, and following him through shame, contempt, and suffering. If you comply not with his demands, whatever they may be, you lack the one thing, an integrity of heart, an unreserved submission to him, for which no compensation can be allowed. Would you, then, depart from him? O, think again what the consequences must be! Those who know your danger tremble and weep for you, though you feel no pity for yourselves.

Jesus, being much affected, directed the attention of all the people, and especially of his disciples, to this occurrence, while he taught them the proper improvement. He declared, such are the snares of riches, such the obstructions which they cause to the spiritual life, that few persons in affluence will be disposed to receive the Gospel, or to pursue that course which alone will conduct them to heaven. Much is to be given up, and many severe struggles to be endured, in all situations; but those whose hearts are attached to their worldly possessions, labour under peculiar difficulties, and it must be a miracle of grace indeed which will enable them to make the necessary sacrifices in the service of God, and for the attainment of his kingdom. The disciples were almost confounded at this intima-

tion, and cried out, with inexpressible astonishment, "Who, then, can be saved?" Jesus replied, that, though the strength of man be insufficient, the power of God will be effectual to accomplish the arduous work. To him, therefore, should our fervent prayers be directed, that by his almighty grace we may resist and overcome the temptations peculiar to our respective circumstances in life.

But, how few are aware of the danger of riches! Instead of fearing, do not almost all eagerly covet, an exalted rank? The affluent, in general, desire no better portion than their temporal possessions, and consider not that these may be the means of excluding them from the happiness of heaven. On the very same principle, also, the poor repine at the appointment of God, when they ought to be thankful that he has placed them in a situation the most favourable to religion. Surely we should be more anxious for spiritual advantages than those which are merely secular, and pray to be preserved from the love of money, through which so many have forsaken Christ, and perished eternally.

Upon Peter's remarking that he and his brethren the Apostles had renounced all their worldly occupations, in their attachment to their Master, Jesus assured them, that at the final consummation, when he himself shall appear upon the throne of his glory, they shall obtain a distinguished honour, and sit with him in judgment on the twelve tribes of Israel. He added also, for the encouragement of others, that those, who incur any losses or sufferings for his sake, shall gain

an abundant recompense, inasmuch as they shall receive even here what will be a hundred-fold better to them in real substantial happiness, and everlasting life hereafter. Yet, in order to excite a holy jealousy in all his followers, he declared that many, who may now seem the foremost in profession and privileges, shall in the end be found the furthest from God; and that some of those, who are thought the most unlikely to be admitted into heaven, shall shine the brightest in it. O, what "great searchings of heart" should this produce in us! Are we acting agreeably to our high character, and the peculiar advantages we enjoy? Are we not afraid, lest they, upon whom we look down with contempt for their supposed inferiority, should excel us in every good attainment? May not our very opportunities for improvement increase our future condemnation?

To illustrate and confirm the solemn admonition, Jesus delivered a parable.* He compared the dispensation of the Gospel to the conduct of a certain householder, who hired labourers for a stipulated sum to gather in his vintage. The engagement was made with some of the servants in the morning, but with others at different hours, as at the third, the sixth, the ninth, and even at the eleventh hour. Yet at the final reckoning there was no discrimination between them, the last being as acceptable, and receiving the same wages, as the first. This gave great offence; for it was thought unjust that those who had been employed the whole day should obtain no superior distinction above

* Matt, xx. 1—16.

such as had wrought only a small part of it. The master, however, vindicated his own proceeding on this ground, that he had done no injury to any of them, and that, as he had an absolute right to bestow his favours where he pleased, none ought to object to that particular kindness with which some were treated.

We cannot be at a loss for the proper application. The Lord God by his word calls us to a laborious service ; and, till we obey that call, we are idle as to the great business of life. He has sent out his messages of mercy to different nations at different periods of the world. The Jews were first admitted into the church ; and the Gentiles, though they resembled the workmen who were hired at the last hour, obtained equal privileges. In like manner, also, persons are brought under the influence of divine grace at various ages ; some being sanctified from their very infancy, while others, after a long course of profligacy, almost in a dying state, are recovered and saved. Many objections are raised against such a dispensation ; and the arrogance of men presumes to call the God of heaven to account. The Jews could not bear that the Heathens should be fellow-heirs with them. The Pharisees, likewise, quarrelled with the Saviour, because publicans and sinners met with a favourable acceptance from him : and to this day there are those who think it dishonourable to his character to take such into his family as have grown old in the service of iniquity.

Is not this conduct, then, to be vindicated ? We perceive the sovereignty and freeness of his grace ; and

ought it not to excite our admiration, love, and praise? Surely he has a right to call what persons, and by whatsoever methods, he shall please. If we be the distinguished objects of this mercy, we should feel the strongest emotions of gratitude; nor shall we have any cause to complain, though others, in a condition seemingly more desperate, be saved upon the same terms with ourselves, or even be preferred before us. Shall we dictate to him how to dispense those favours which none can claim? And would it not argue an odious malevolence in us to murmur at his extensive kindness towards those who have been most abandoned? If that be our temper, it is probable that some whom we may despise for their ignorance and profaneness may enter into heaven, and we ourselves, with our presumptuous expectations, be for ever cast out. Let us not depend upon an external profession: among the thousands, to whom the Gospel invitation is published, but few comparatively are chosen to final salvation.

At length our Lord departed from the country, to which he had fled, and set out on his last journey to Jerusalem.* He knew that the appointed time of his sufferings approached; and yet, with a full view of all that was coming upon him, he hastened to finish his work. So great was his ardour in advancing towards the murderous city, where he was to lay down his life, that his disciples, being aware of danger, were filled with amazement, and terrified at the prospect before them, as they followed him in the way. To prepare

* Matt. xx. 17—28. Mark x. 32—46. Luke xvii. 31—34.

them for the awful scene, he reminded them of the calamities which awaited him; and predicted, in a clear and circumstantial manner, that he should be betrayed, condemned, delivered to the Roman power, mocked, scourged, spit upon, and taken off by the ignominious and excruciating death of the cross; yet he added, that he should be finally victorious by rising again on the third day. This was a remarkable prophecy, express, and frequently repeated; but even the twelve could not comprehend its meaning, which was rendered obscure by its repugnance to their prejudices and expectations. Let us contemplate the love of the Redeemer, till our hearts burn within us. How great was his eagerness to accomplish our salvation, since his alacrity and vigour increased as he saw his agonies approaching! Let us not shrink from his service, though we may meet with severe and complicated trials; but go forth with cheerfulness and zeal to the work assigned us, content to "suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together."*

But what do we hear, after this solemn declaration? A most unseasonable petition was presented to Jesus from two of the Apostles. James and John solicited, through their mother, that they might possess the chief posts in his kingdom. Probably they still retained the expectation of his erecting a temporal dominion, and wished to secure the highest preferment. Considering the persons from whom the request came, and the occasion on which it was offered, we cannot but be astonished. Yet the ignorance, pride, and

* Rom. viii. 17.

perverseness, which remain in the best characters will sufficiently account for the inconsistency.

Jesus very sharply reprov'd them for their unsuitable and ill-timed application, and warn'd them that they should soon be call'd to partake with him of extreme sufferings, which with a vain self-confidence they profess'd their readiness to do ; but he declar'd that the chief honours of his kingdom were already dispos'd of in the counsels of his Father. The ten other Apostles were also displeas'd with them for the desire they had express'd ; but even in this, it should seem, they too discover'd a temper of mind equally blameable, as being actuated by envy and resentment. O Lord, subdue in us all carnal affections ! For, while we behold such a strength of corruption in thy favoured companions, we tremble for ourselves.

There was a suitable occasion, and Jesus, embrac'd it, for inculcating those dispositions and principles which discriminate and adorn his people. He show'd, that, instead of that thirst for power and worldly distinctions which prevail'd among the Heathens, they should possess a peculiar humility and meekness, a willingness to give up their own ease and consequence, and a readiness to submit to the meanest and most arduous services, for the real interest and happiness of others. He himself had set them an example of this generous condescension, in relinquishing a state of glory, appearing in the very lowest condition upon earth, and consenting to ransom the captive souls of men at the price of his own blood. If we, then, profess to follow the Saviour, we see what tempers become us. And are

we willing to forego our own accommodations, that we may render ourselves useful in the world? Is the pride of our hearts subdued? Do we indulge no ambitious desires or expectations? Is "nothing done through strife or vain glory?" And do we "mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate?"* These inquiries will show that few resemble the meek and suffering Saviour, and that there is very little of genuine practical Christianity among us.

Jesus passed through Jericho towards Jerusalem, and as he went out of that city, attended as usual by a large company, an opportunity was offered for the display of his power and compassion. Two distressed objects, † totally deprived of sight, sat by the road, imploring relief; and, learning that Jesus of Nazareth was at hand (of whose character and miraculous operations they had been previously informed), they exclaimed aloud, professing their faith in him as the promised Messiah, and earnestly soliciting his merciful interposition in their favour. They were reprov'd by the multitude, and charg'd to desist from their clamour. Feeling, however, the urgency of their own case, they renewed their petition with the greater importunity, "Have mercy on us, O Lord, thou Son of David!" A cry

* Phil. ii. 3. Rom. xii. 16.

† Matt. xx. 20, &c. Mark x. 46, &c. Luke xviii. 35, &c.— St. Mark and St. Luke mention but one of these cases, and St. Mark introduces the very name of this beggar, Bartimeus, the son of Timeus, probably because he was the most noted person, and the chief speaker upon the occasion.

like this he never disregarded, and therefore, with the most gracious condescension, when he had called them to him, he granted their request. Immediately, by his touch, he restored their sight, and gave a public approbation of their dependence upon him. Nor was this all: his love won their hearts, and constrained them to follow him, while with gratitude and joy they glorified God for their great deliverance.

Are not we, also, under the strongest obligations to adore, and praise, and serve this merciful Redeemer? We cannot too frequently remark that we all stand in need of his help, if not for the cure of an afflicted body, yet for the removal of our spiritual maladies. And here we have an emblem of one great blessing which he bestows, and of his kind attention to every distressed supplicant. He renews our disordered faculties, and refits them for their proper use: He “openeth the eyes of the blind.”

You, therefore, who hear that Jesus passeth by, implore the effectual interposition of his power and compassion in your behalf. O, cry to him, and never cease your importunate requests till he vouchsafe a gracious answer. There are those, perhaps, who will rebuke you, and charge you to desist. But, instead of being thereby deterred, be excited to pray the more fervently, “Thou Son of David, have mercy on us.” He will listen to your voice, and permit you to spread your wants before him. Is it not your desire that he would communicate spiritual light to your minds? He will readily grant it, if only you can depend upon him. Then, having obtained the object of your peti-

tion, endeavour to show your gratitude to your heavenly Benefactor. Follow him in the way wherein he leads, praise him for his mercy, and testify his goodness to others, that they also may be induced to give glory to his name. The Son of David is worthy to receive all honour, and love, and worship, and obedience, throughout all generations. Amen.

JESUS CHRIST.

SECT. XXX.

Jesus visited Zaccheus the publican, who became a true convert ; and, as he approached to Jerusalem, he delivered the parable of the ten pounds.

THE city of Jericho had been formerly rendered famous by the remarkable triumph which Joshua there obtained. In this same spot the Lord Jesus triumphed by his grace, and erected a trophy in proof of his victory over Satan. He had already manifested his high character, in the confines of the town, by giving sight to the blind : but a more illustrious instance of his power and mercy is now to be exhibited, in the conversion of a notorious sinner. Let us “ praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men.” How many witnesses declare that He is “ mighty to save !” Every fresh example encourages our application to him and dependence upon him. May his Spirit work effectually in us, that, while we contemplate his free and extensive kindness to others, we also may partake of his great salvation !

As Jesus passed through Jericho, he was attended by an immense concourse of people. Perhaps, also,

the miracle which he wrought there added to his train. One of this numerous company is selected for our peculiar notice ; and his case is considered by the sacred historian as so interesting, that it is introduced with a mark of admiration.* “ Behold, there was a man named Zaccheus, which was the chief among the publicans, and he was rich.” By his rank in life, as principal of the tax-gatherers, having many collectors under him, he possessed no small influence, and had raised an ample fortune. A situation this, most unfavourable to religion ! Power and wealth are great hinderances in the way of salvation : those who are most exalted in the world seem the furthest removed from the very means of conversion. They are, as it were, fenced round with strong barriers, which prevent an access to their hearts. When such persons, therefore, become “ obedient to the faith,” the hand of the Lord is illustriously displayed in the change. His grace is effectual to surmount all difficulties ; when he is pleased to work, none shall let it : † “ even the rich among the people shall entreat in his favour.” ‡

But Zaccheus had, also, been a man of base character and iniquitous conduct ; covetous, unjust, and oppressive. And some may be ready to ask, Can such an one obtain mercy ? Or is it probable that Jesus should ever look with a favourable regard upon him ? Yes : the very man before us is singled out as a monument of his mercy, in order to show that he can pardon, sanctify, and save, the chief of sinners.

* Luke xix. 1—10. † Isa. xliii. 13. ‡ Psal. xlv. 12.

Zaccheus, it should seem, sought not for any acquaintance with Jesus, but, probably, was induced by mere curiosity to mix with the multitude, that he might gain a sight of the remarkable Person of whom he had heard so much. But not being able to gratify his wishes, on account of the crowd and his own diminutive size, he mounted up into a tree by the side of the road, that he might have a distinct view. Jesus observed him, and called to him by name, desiring him to come down, and expressing an intention of being his guest. Thus our Lord was the first to propose the visit; and, by this unsolicited favour, he “prevented him with the blessings of goodness.”

We rejoice when the careless and profane are brought by any motive to attend where Jesus vouchsafes his presence. Very frequently they obtain those benefits which they never coveted or sought. Various inducements may lead them to the place, where the divine ordinances are administered, and the truth of the Gospel is faithfully declared; such as general custom, habits of education, the solicitations of others, some strange reports about the preacher or the doctrine, and an inquisitive desire to know what can attract so large a concourse of people. Now however weak or wrong these reasons may be, we would still encourage them to come and show themselves, where the Saviour passeth by. Perhaps he may unexpectedly look upon them, and reveal himself to them, as he did to Zaccheus. Thus, in many cases, repentance, faith, and love, have been suddenly produced under those means which were first resorted to through an idle curiosity. They who

meant to be mere spectators, or captious critics, have found themselves deeply interested: their hearts have been instantly impressed and changed, so that they have departed with sentiments and dispositions very different from those which they brought with them. Jesus beholds them with compassion, and, even before they offer up a prayer to him, speaks effectually to their consciences, and attaches them inseparably to himself. In the conversion of every sinner the unmerited grace of God is gloriously displayed: but in these instances more especially it appears at once that "boasting is excluded;" and that their love to the Saviour is properly the fruit of his love to them; that "they have not chosen him, but he hath chosen them."*

The call was no sooner given to Zaccheus than it was cheerfully obeyed: and it is of importance to remark the astonishing alteration which he immediately discovered. The effect, however, must be ascribed, not only to the word of Christ, but to the divine Spirit, which rendered that word so powerful. With eager haste the rich publican came down from the tree, where he had taken his place, and received his illustrious guest with expressions of lively joy. He could not but be surprised to hear a perfect stranger to him, as he might conceive, addressing him by name, and proposing to abide at his house: but it is evident that he instantly felt a conviction of the high dignity of the Personage before him, and considered the offer as an act of gracious condescension. His heart, therefore, being first opened, he was glad to admit the divine Vi-

* John xv. 16.

sitant within his doors, and thought himself honoured by his presence.

Is this the reception which the Saviour meets with among ourselves? How few yield a ready obedience to his word! "He hath called, but we refused: He hath stretched out his hand, and no man regarded."* Is there, even with you who profess an attention to his Gospel, any thing like that affectionate attachment to him which Zaccheus showed? Would you consent that he should abide with you; and would you rejoice to furnish an entertainment for him? He is, indeed, removed from the earth; but you have many of his representatives around you, and you are required to evince your love for him by your kindness to them. Do you, then, search out his poor members, that you may minister to their necessities? Do you embrace every opportunity of relieving them? And are you thankful for the exalted privilege? This fruit of divine grace we observe in Zaccheus. While he made a public confession of his former wickedness before Jesus and all the company, he wished to testify the sincerity of his repentance. He, whose grand object had been to amass worldly treasures, was no sooner acquainted with the Saviour, than he expressed a willingness to give up a large share of his wealth for the support of the indigent. He declared his determination to consecrate his substance to the Lord, by devoting even the half of it to charitable purposes. The same extensive distribution, according to that exact division of our property, is not binding upon us. But we are strangers to the

* Prov. i. 24.

love of Christ, if we shut up our bowels of compassion from the afflicted, nay, if we do not "open our hand wide unto them," as God hath prospered us. Ah! how many warm advocates for the Gospel betray their insincerity by "having a heart exercised with covetous practices!"*

But you are required to be just as well as liberal: for God says, "I hate robbery for burnt-offering."† If there be any dishonest gain in your possession, if you have enriched yourselves by fraud or extortion, it is surely known unto God, and an explicit confession should be made. Thus the publican acknowledged his baseness in oppressing the people by a violent and injurious execution of his office. But you must do more than merely declare your sorrow for the past. Nor is it enough for "him that stole to steal no more;" you must not retain in your hands what you have wrongfully taken from another. Suppose not that by giving a pittance of it to the poor your guilt will be expiated: for such charity is continued theft. It is not yours to bestow: it is another's property, and, if you can find the owner, you must restore it.

This strong and necessary evidence of sincere contrition appeared in Zaccheus. "I am ready," said he, "not only to relinquish the full amount of what I have gained from any person by false charges, but to return him four times as much."‡ In many cases it may be difficult to settle what particular compensation is proper: and we fear that few are troubled

* 2 Pet. ii. 14. † Isa. lxi. 8. ‡ See Lev. vi. 1-5.

with any scruples upon the subject. But let every reader make a faithful appeal to his conscience, and attend to its report. Have all your past transactions been conducted according to the rules of truth and equity? Have you no painful remembrance of any fraud or extortion which you have practised? And are you not concerned to make all possible reparation for whatever injuries you have done? If you refuse this as a degree of preciseness which is needless or absurd, talk not of your Christianity; your hypocrisy is most glaring. "Go your way; first be reconciled to your brother," by offering restitution and satisfaction, according to your ability, before you pretend to devotion.

Jesus himself, who knew "what was in man," bore an unquestionable testimony in favour of Zaccheus, declaring that he had that day obtained salvation, and proved himself a real child of Abraham. This could not be on account of his descent merely, but because he had the faith of Abraham, and experienced the renovation of the Holy Ghost. Probably, he arose in the morning ignorant, careless, and profane; but before night how great a change took place! he received a new heart, the forgiveness of his sins, and the assurance of divine favour. How extensive, and how powerful, is the grace of God! Has it produced such effects as these in us? It is of little consequence whether the transformation be sudden; but is it certain? Has the Saviour visited us with the blessings of redemption? To "as many as receive him he gives power to become the sons of God, even to them that

believe on his name.”* “And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”†

Who shall object to this? The very mercy of God, which should draw forth praises from every tongue, frequently excites disgust. Some appear unwilling that atrocious offenders should be saved at all, or, at least, that pardon and eternal life should be offered to them on the same terms as to themselves. There were those who cavilled at the conduct of Jesus for the kind notice which he took of Zaccheus, whose character was generally accounted infamous. But he vindicated himself on this ground, that the very end for which he came into the world was “to seek and to save that which was lost;” and therefore he was acting agreeably to his grand design, in using means to rescue them from destruction, whose case seemed of all others the most desperate. Justly may we rejoice in this representation. We have no right to despise any persons, as if we might claim a preference; for the whole human race, having departed from God, are equally involved in ruin, and unable to extricate themselves. But Jesus appears for our help, and accomplishes deliverance for us: nor is any sinner sunk so low as to be beyond the reach of his mercy. He proposes salvation to us, and earnestly solicits our acceptance. Various methods he adopts for the recovery of our souls: let us not resist him, but yield ourselves in cheerful subjection to him, that his grace may reign in us unto eternal life.

* John i. 12.

† Gal. iii. 29.

After the conversion of Zaccheus, Jesus pursued his journey towards Jerusalem. Upon his nearer approach to the city, his followers expected that he would immediately assume the pomp and power of an earthly monarch, and establish an universal government.* To correct these mistaken notions, he delivered a parable, in which he represented the nature of his dominion, and the opposition made to it, and admonished them that the proper business of his people is not to be solicitous for secular honours, but to employ themselves diligently in their appointed work till he shall come again, when he will receive his faithful servants to himself, and destroy his enemies.

A nobleman, or prince, departed to a distant country, to be invested with full powers for the possession of a kingdom, to which he was heir; and then he proposed to return in all the glory of majesty. But, in the mean time, many of those, who, from their peculiar relation to him, were more especially bound to submit to his authority, with great malignity declared their firm determination to resist and reject him in his regal character. This is exactly the case with the Lord Jesus Christ. He is One of illustrious origin, of high descent, as "the Only-begotten of the Father," and "Heir of all things," concerning whom Jehovah himself hath sworn "That unto Him every knee shall bow, every tongue confess."† But his universal sovereignty was not to be established during his abode on earth, which was intended to be a state of profound humiliation. "He came not to be ministered unto,

* Luke xix. 11--28. † Isa. xlv. 23. Phil. ii. 10, 11.

but to minister." In order to enter upon his government, it was necessary for him to quit this world, and ascend to his Father : and then the sceptre was delivered into his hands. At the appointed season he will return with all the ensigns of royalty, and with irresistible power. He will come in his glory ; and that shall be the day of his triumph.

For the present his dominion is not generally acknowledged. The Jews especially, who were his own people more than others, and ought to have submitted to him with joy, have shown a most malignant opposition to him, and solemnly renounced him as their ruler. But, without further notice of them, the question for ourselves is, Do we reverence the Saviour as we ought in his regal office ? The kingdom is His : Do we rejoice in it ? Do we cordially consent that " this Man shall reign over us ?" Are we looking for his future advent ? What reception may we expect from him when he appears ? Or, what should be our deportment till he return ?

The prince here described left his ten servants behind him, with the care of a certain portion of money. Ten pounds were committed to their management, of which they were charged to make a diligent use during his absence. Under these circumstances the disciples of Jesus are placed. They profess subjection to him, and they should act at his command. Their very name, as they are "servants," implies their obligations to work, agreeably to his directions. They are intrusted with various advantages, one in one way, and another in another ; and these they are

required to improve, as men in trade, that they may turn them to the most profitable account. It is intended, indeed, that they, who are faithful to their Master, shall be sharers with him in the future glory of his kingdom : yet for the present they are appointed, not to any high honours or distinctions in the world, as some persons then vainly dreamed, but to a post of labour and difficulty ; and their most vigorous efforts are necessary in the business assigned them.

The prince returned in full possession of the sovereignty which he had expected, and strictly examined his servants what benefit had accrued from their use of the money committed to them. Two of the number, by their fidelity and diligence in commerce, had made considerable improvement of their stock, though one of them was far inferior to the other. Both came and acknowledged their obligations to their lord, as if they had said, “ We are indebted to thee for the advantages bestowed upon us ; and the increase we have gained must be ascribed to thy favour, which enabled us to maintain our occupation, rather than to our own wisdom and good management.” The conduct of both was approved, and publicly commended ; and they were then appointed to a state of exaltation and dignity, proportioned to their respective exertions and usefulness in the service of their master.

The day of reckoning is at hand, and it will soon appear what good we have done in our place, what profitable purposes have been promoted by our various opportunities. The disciples of Jesus, under the influence of his grace, are all active ; and, by a faithful

attention to their Lord's concerns, they render themselves a blessing in their generation, though in different ways, and in different degrees. "When he shall appear, they shall have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming." The most eminent of them will not then presume to boast of their own works, or their progress in holiness; but they will all praise him for the efficacy of his Spirit in them, and for the advancement of his own glory, by their weak and unworthy efforts. They will say, therefore, "All things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee."* But their labour shall receive a distinguished recompense: Jesus will profess himself well pleased in them, and admit them to a participation of his own honour and felicity, according to the various measures of their zeal and fidelity in his cause. O, be animated, you that serve him, while you "have respect unto the recompense of the reward!" Be roused from your sloth; for are not your languid exertions very unsuitable to such high expectations? Are you trading with your pound to any beneficial purpose? What is the increase which you have gained? O, "be not wearied nor faint in your minds;" but "hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ!"†

A third character, very different from the two preceding, is here also exhibited. He had made no use at all of the advantages intrusted to him; for he had not traded with his pound. He had not, indeed, squandered it away in dissipation, but, neglecting to im-

* Chron. xxix. 14. † Heb, xii. 13. 1 Pet. i. 13.

prove it, "laid it up in a napkin." He is represented as pleading in his own excuse, with great insolence, that his lord was a severe and rigid master, who exacted such services as he had no right to, and for which he would not grant sufficient strength and ability.

This is the case with many who are admired in the world. They are satisfied with doing no harm, and see not their obligations to be active and useful in their Christian calling. They live, therefore, a quiet indolent life, and can scarcely be said to have a place in existence. If we inquire of them why they decline the work of the Lord, they are always ready to complain of insurmountable difficulties, and express hard thoughts of God, as requiring more than is reasonable, and more than they can possibly perform. But, without examining the truth or justice of these pleas, we observe that their very excuses will turn to their own confusion.

The master convicted this indolent man of the most palpable inconsistency, and argued, that, even on his own principles, he ought to have made some use of his money. He declared, "Out of thine own mouth will I judge thee, thou wicked servant." Thus it will appear at the last that sinners are not influenced by their own foolish pretences, that their negligence is unpardonable in every view, and that what they urge in their defence will furnish sufficient ground for their condemnation, as evincing their rooted enmity against God.

The pound was taken from him, who was too slothful to improve it, and given as an additional recompense to the person who had been most assiduous.

And this, we are assured, is agreeable to the general dispensations of God. He will put the most honourable distinction on them who discover the greatest fidelity and diligence ; but those, who through disaffection refuse to exert themselves for him, will be deprived of all their advantages, and never allowed another trial. May we adore his justice, and tremble for ourselves !

The prince, who was heir to the kingdom, was rejected, as we have seen, by his own citizens, who were under peculiar obligations to receive and welcome him. But, when he had assumed his full power, he proceeded to punish their insolence ; and, while he vindicated his authority, he destroyed with terrible vengeance those enemies of his government. Thus Jesus predicted, that, though his own nation would openly avow a determined opposition to him, he should come again to assert his supreme dominion, and give them up to the most severe calamities, and to everlasting perdition, for their rebellion against him. This has been in part fulfilled already. The Jews, in their national capacity, renounced the Saviour with the utmost malignity, and resisted every effort to establish his kingdom amongst them. But they have felt the weight of his arm. To avenge the insults put upon him, their holy city was ransacked, their temple demolished, their land desolated, their ecclesiastical and civil polity entirely subverted, and a tremendous slaughter, unparalleled in history, nearly completed the ruin of the people.

This alone is enough to strike us with horror ; but it is not all. Another and a far more terrible display of

his justice, in the punishment of his enemies, remains for his future advent. And in that, not the unbelieving Jews alone, but all in every age and nation who reject the Saviour, will be deeply concerned. Whoever shall be found opposers of his grace, unwilling to bow to his sceptre, shall be brought forth for public execution, a spectacle to the whole universe, and shall feel the fierceness of his anger, in torment inexpressible, for ever and ever. Let every soul, then, yield an immediate and unreserved subjection to this "King of Zion." Constrained by his mercies, as well as awed by his terrors, let us surrender up ourselves to him, that he may reign over us, and prepare us to reign with him in his glory. Amen.

J E S U S C H R I S T.

SECT. XXXI.

Jesus raised Lazarus from the grave—was anointed with costly perfume—rode in triumph to Jerusalem—wept over it—purged the temple.

A MORE particular account is given us of the circumstances attending and immediately preceding the death of Jesus than of any part of his life. We are approaching to that important period; and, as we accompany him through the awful scene, we shall observe by what steps the surprising event was accomplished. The subject is calculated, not to gratify a vain curiosity, but to impress our minds with seriousness and solemnity.

We have already contemplated our Lord setting out on his last journey to Jerusalem; previous to which, however, an interesting occurrence had called him into the neighbourhood of that city, though he was soon driven back again by the malicious rage of his enemies, and obliged to seek a distant retreat till his appointed hour arrived. That occurrence we shall introduce in this place, as it is closely connected with the sequel.*

* John xi. 1, &c.

At Bethany, as we have seen, about two miles from Jerusalem, dwelt a pious and beloved family, who were frequently favoured with his company. Lazarus, the head of the family, was seized with a violent disorder, of which his two affectionate sisters, Mary and Martha, sent information to Jesus, while he remained beyond Jordan. Upon receiving this account, Jesus observed that the sickness would not terminate in Lazarus's final departure from life, but was intended to display the character, and exalt the glory, of the Son of God. He meant, therefore, to grant relief; and yet he judged it expedient to try the faith and patience of those, for whom he had the strongest regard, by deferring his aid, and suffering their distress to increase. After two days, and not sooner, he proposed to return into Judea; but the disciples, aware of the malicious designs of his enemies, objected to the plan. He declared, however, that, as the day is the proper time for travellers to prosecute their journey, so he should spend the short residue of his life in a diligent attention to the great business for which he came into the world.

He then intimated to them the situation of Lazarus, and his own intentions respecting him. But his words were not understood till he affirmed more explicitly that Lazarus was dead, and that he considered it as a happy circumstance that he himself was not with him to prevent the change, because their faith would receive an additional confirmation from the miracle of which they were going to be witnesses. Still they thought it extremely dangerous to venture so near to Jerusalem; but Thomas advised that they should

cheerfully accompany their dear Master, though the consequence might be fatal to them all.

The affecting narrative will teach even you, whom Jesus loves, not to be surprised if sickness or sore distress come upon you. In your deepest afflictions, you ought not to conclude that he has acted unkindly, or that he will not deliver you. Perhaps you are unwilling to wait for his interposition ; and for that very reason it may be delayed till your case may seem desperate. But in the end you shall perceive stronger proofs of his power and grace, and find his mercy the more precious. You should learn, also, from your Saviour, to improve the hours of the day, and “to walk,” while you “see the light of this world :” remembering that all your opportunities of usefulness will be closed when the night of death arrives. You should be roused to diligence and vigour ; nor should the prospect of dangers intimidate you. Desert not your standard ; but determine, like Thomas, to adhere steadfastly to Jesus, and to “follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth,” even to the severest tortures, or to martyrdom itself.

When they came to Bethany, Lazarus had been four days in his grave ; and many friends from Jerusalem were assembled at the house, endeavouring to comfort the mourning sisters for the loss of their brother. Upon an intimation of the approach of Jesus, Martha, with all that eagerness which marked her natural temper, ran to meet him ; and, though she seemed to upbraid him for not preventing their distress, she expressed a hope that at his prayer some deliverance might yet be obtained. Her language evinced her

faith ; but at the same time it betrayed much weakness. Jesus in reply, without reproving her for what was wrong or defective in her principles, declared that Lazarus should rise again ; but a resurrection from the dead, merely at the final consummation, was not the relief she wished. He then directed her attention to himself, “ as the resurrection and the life,” that she might have clearer conceptions of his exalted character, and be so strengthened in her dependence upon him as to expect the miraculous operation, which he meant to perform. His words were most sublime, and replete with instruction of peculiar importance. He assured her, that as the Author, Restorer, and Preserver of life, he has all power in himself to quicken whom he will, and that every believer, by virtue of an union with him, is brought into a state of glorious existence, which death cannot destroy or impair. Upon his inquiring whether she yielded a cordial assent to this interesting truth, she perfectly acquiesced, professing her firm persuasion that he was indeed the promised Saviour, the Son of God.

Have we, likewise, so regarded Jesus, as he is here represented ? Behold what honour is due to his name ! Is he not to be revered and worshipped as “ the mighty God,” since he vindicates to himself the prerogative of reviving those over whom death has prevailed, and of imparting and supporting a principle of endless life, according to his own sovereign pleasure ? Shall we not, then, stand in awe, and confess and adore the Divinity in this exalted Personage ? What answer shall we return to the question, “ Believest thou this ?” It is indispensably necessary for every one to credit his declaration,

and rely upon him for the blessing which he proposes to bestow. The promise of salvation, including both spiritual and eternal life, is annexed to faith. If we possess an unreserved dependence upon him, how great is our felicity ! We shall feel the quickening energy of his Spirit giving vigour to our souls, and maintaining that vigour against all opposition. Nor shall any thing be able to destroy our union with him. Our present mode of existence may cease, and our bodies be consigned to the grave ; but we shall even then enjoy a state of happiness and glory with him ; and at the last day “ He will swallow up death in victory,” “ ransom us from the power of the grave,” and give us our perfect consummation and bliss, both in body and soul, in his own everlasting kingdom. What an unfailing source of consolation is here ! “ Sorrow not,” then, believers, “ as others which have no hope.”

Mary, who seems to have been almost overwhelmed with grief, remained in the house for some time ; but at length, being called by her sister, she also ran with eager haste to meet Jesus. The interview then became extremely affecting. The distress of these affectionate relations and their weeping associates excited the tenderest emotions in the Saviour ; and thus, while he sympathized with the afflicted, he proved himself a partaker of human nature. Many considerations, probably, upon this mournful occasion, oppressed his mind, and constrained him, as he indulged his compassionate feelings, to burst into tears. He accompanied them to the sepulchre, and directed the stone to be removed. Martha objected that the body was become offensive,

evidently implying that deliverance could not then be effected : but Jesus immediately reprov'd her for her unbelief. Standing by the tomb, with uplifted eyes to heaven, he gave thanks to his Father for granting his requests, and for the present opportunity of displaying his glory ; and with a divine majesty, as the supreme Almighty Lord, " to whom belong the issues from death," he commanded the grave to release its prisoner. At this powerful word Lazarus came forth with life, and health, and vigour.

O, what surprise, and joy, and gratitude, must have overwhelmed the dear friends, upon the miraculous restoration of him whom they so tenderly loved, and had considered as irrecoverably removed from their society ! Doubtless they looked up with admiration, love, and praise, to the great Deliverer. But how much more illustrious the triumph when ALL the saints of God shall be raised incorruptible, each of them clothed with a splendour resembling the sun in the firmament ! Then also the eyes of the whole redeemed company, shall be fixed on the Saviour with unutterable ecstasy, and the glory shall be ascribed to him, who is " the resurrection and the life."

Will not this be allowed as an unquestionable evidence of our Lord's divine character ? Who can withstand the testimony of one that arose from the dead ? Will not all be constrained to yield unfeigned reverence and submission to the Son of God ? Many of those who were present felt a forcible conviction from the view of the miracle, and immediately believed on him. But, oh ! the blindness and obduracy of the

human heart! External proofs are not sufficient to produce the efficacious principle of faith; the mighty power of God is requisite to implant the proper disposition of mind. Some, who were witnesses of the wondrous effect, carried information of it to his avowed adversaries, and, as it should seem, with the malevolent intention of exciting opposition against him. At their report the grand council of the sanhedrim was assembled, to consult upon the steps necessary to be taken for obviating his increasing popularity. The result of their deliberation was, to endeavour by some method or other to destroy him; and in this they were directed by the advice of Caiaphas, the high-priest, who spake by a divine impulse what he did not understand, that it was expedient that one man should die for the people. But vain were all their designs of violence till his hour came. He retired to Ephraim, a distant city, not far from the river Jordan, where he lay concealed till within a few days of his last passover, when he surrendered himself to their malice.

Let us meditate on the unbelief and obstinacy of the Jews, not that we may frame any bitter invectives against them, but that we may fear for ourselves. Their case furnishes the most solemn admonition. Let us beware of resisting the evidences which are set before us, lest we be given up to a similar obduracy. Let us pray that God would put forth his power, in subduing our natural depravity; for it requires the same almighty energy, which raised Lazarus from the grave, to bring us into a state of unfeigned subjection to the Saviour. Thus may we be constrained to trust, and

love, and serve him, and to glory in him as "the Author of eternal salvation!"

Jesus, who withdrew from persecution, has taught us to be prudent in consulting our safety, when no express duty makes it proper to hazard it. But his example likewise instructs us to face the most formidable dangers with firmness and intrepidity, in obedience to the will of God. At the appointed season, he kept not back from the murderous city, where his enemies thirsted for his blood; though he had all his sufferings full in his view, he advanced to meet them with cheerfulness and courage.

Six days before the passover he returned to Bethany, whence he had been driven by the violence of the Jews.* In that town an entertainment was provided for him in the house of Simon, who, from his surname, had probably once been a leper. Lazarus, also, whom he had raised from the grave, was one of the guests upon that occasion; and Martha discovered her attachment by waiting upon him. Mary, the other sister of Lazarus, that she might testify her affectionate regard and high veneration, procured a box of expensive ointment, composed of rich perfumes: part she poured upon his head, and with the remainder anointed his feet, wiping them at the same time with her flowing hair. The action was extraordinary, and so were the circumstances. We must ascribe it, doubtless, to the most excellent principles, which rendered it acceptable to Jesus. Such was her fervent love, that she spared no cost to give a striking proof of it; such her deep

* Matt. xxvi. 6—13. Mark xiv. 3--9. John xii. 1--11.

humility, that she wished to perform the meanest, as well as the kindest office for him.

But her conduct disgusted some, even of the disciples, who probably condemned it as wild and extravagant. Judas, in particular, objected to her from the basest motives; while he pretended, what he never felt, a tender concern for the poor, and argued that the price of the ointment had better have been devoted to charitable uses; he meant to appropriate it to his own use. Jesus, however, who knew the purity of her intentions, and the strength of her regard for him, undertook her defence. He justified and commended the action, as being well suited to his dying situation, and, as it were, an embalming of his body, preparatory to his burial. He observed, that opportunities of relieving indigence continually occur, which should draw forth the benevolence of his people: but that, as he was soon to leave them, and few more occasions of ministering to him would be afforded, some extraordinary marks of respect might properly be paid him at that time. He declared also, to show his gracious acceptance of her love, that, wherever the Gospel should be published, her affection for him should be celebrated.

This little narrative will furnish an instructive lesson. Let us not precipitately or warmly censure those zealous exertions in the service of Christ which may appear to us needless or extravagant. While we condemn, Jesus may highly approve. The ardour of some persons, in certain uncommon cases, may carry them such lengths as would be extremely improper in the ordinary course of things. We may not clearly under-

stand the circumstances or the motives of their conduct ; and therefore let us leave them to him, who knows their hearts, and who will not only make all favourable allowances for the sincere, but applaud and reward whatever they have done from the pure, disinterested regard to him.

Perhaps you, who are forward to reproach others for their intemperate heat, may be much more displeasing to Christ by your coldness and hesitation, and fear of going too far in his cause. How rare is such love as that of Mary to her Lord and Saviour ! Many will profess a strong attachment to him, who refuse to be at any expense in his service. We ask, then, if you can part with your money for his sake ? You cannot, indeed, yield an exact imitation of this pious woman, since the bodily presence of Jesus is removed from the earth. But his poor remain among us, and they are appointed his receivers : “ whensoever ye will, ye may do them good.” O, let us beware of a covetous parsimonious spirit, which would represent a liberal disposition as improper or wasteful. There are those, who will plead for charity, as Judas, till they are brought to the trial ; and then it appears that they are more anxious to increase their own store than to relieve the indigent. Let us judge ourselves ; why are we content with doing so little, or why do we rate that little so highly ?

When it was known at Jerusalem that Jesus was in the neighbourhood, a large concourse of people resorted from that city to Bethany, not merely for his sake, but that they might have a sight of Lazarus, who was

so wonderful a monument of his power and grace. The miracle which had been wrought had already attached the hearts of many to the Saviour, and excited the curiosity of more; but the chief priests, who were enraged on this very account, seriously meditated not only his destruction, but that also of him who had been recalled from the grave. How foolish as well as wicked the design! He, who had been once raised from the dead, might, with the same ease, have been instantly restored again. But those who resist the Lord's Anointed are chargeable with the grossest absurdity. Their wisest contrivances are "a vain thing:" and "the Lord shall have them in derision."*

We do not wonder, that they, whose cases have illustriously displayed the mercy of the Redeemer, are persecuted, like Lazarus, with peculiar malignity. The enemies of Jesus, who really aim at Him, direct their envenomed shafts against them who are witnesses for his name. Believers, however, may possess peace and confidence in the midst of opposition, since their Defender is invincible. He, who keepeth them, has numbered the very hairs of their head, and declares that "none shall pluck them out of his hand.†"

We have accompanied Jesus to the neighbourhood of Jerusalem, and now we contemplate his remarkable entrance into the city. Hitherto we have seen that he sought not any worldly honours, having studiously declined even the semblance of pomp and ostentation. But toward the close of his life we perceive a different scene. We behold the humble Nazarene attended by

* Psal. ii. 1--14.

† John x. 28.

a singular procession, in which, while he permitted the people to do him homage, he designed to exhibit a representation of his regal character.

Anno Dom, 31. On the day after his entertainment at Beth-Sunday before any, he proceeded on his journey. When the Passover.

he came to the mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples to an adjacent village, that they might bring thence an ass and her unbroken foal.* He directed them to the very place, and so minutely described the circumstances in which they should find the animals, as to show his exact knowledge of things distant, and seemingly accidental. The narrative also proves that he could influence the minds of men as he pleased; for the owners of the ass relinquished her without hesitation, upon being told that "the Lord had need of her." The young colt he condescended to make the bearer of his person, and rode in a sort of triumph to the city, with much meekness, and yet with an appearance of majesty.†

* Matt. xxi. 1--16. Mark xi. 1--11. Luke xix. 29, &c. John xii. 12--19.

† There was nothing ridiculous or mean in Christ's riding on an ass; for, not to mention that this animal in eastern countries is of a larger size and more graceful appearance than among us, some of the most eminent persons, patriarchs, judges, and kings, made use of asses: and, probably, with a reference to that primitive simplicity, he chose this method of going in solemn and triumphant procession to Jerusalem. Gen. xxii. 3. Exod. iv. 20. Judg. v. 10. x. 4. 2 Sam. xvi. 2. xix. 26. He meant to assert his regal character, according to the ancient style and custom of their princes, and to declare his regard to the law, by discountenancing that use

Many persons conducted him from Bethany ; and many more, having heard of his raising Lazarus from the grave, came from Jerusalem to meet him. The whole multitude, as if by a miraculous impulse, appeared to vie with each other in ascribing all possible honours to him. They spread their garments in the way, and, cutting down branches of trees, part of them they strewed upon the road, and with part they marched before him ; these being usual expressions of joy upon the arrival of a potent monarch or victorious general. Under a full conviction that Jesus was the Messiah, and the expectation of his assuming the government, they began to praise God with a loud voice, and to shout with exultation, though they understood not the import of their own words, " Hosanna to the Son of David ; blessed is the King that cometh in the name of the Lord ; peace in heaven, and glory in the highest !"

Do we ask the reason of all this ? Among other causes to be assigned, it was the purpose of God to fulfil an ancient prophecy. Zechariah had expressly foretold* that the Saviour, the King of Zion, would make such a public appearance as is here described. The most minute circumstances in this view, as completions of former and authentic predictions, are important ; they furnish incontestable evidence for the truth of the Gospel. How manifold is the wisdom of God,

of horses, which had been introduced through a fondness for splendour, and which God had expressly forbidden, Deut. xvii. 16. See Bp. Chandler's *Defence of Christianity*, and Bp. Sherlock's *Dissertation on Christ's entrance into Jerusalem*,

* Zech. ix. 9.

who raised up holy men, and instructed them to declare, some hundred years before, many of the things which the Redeemer should both do and say! No event can take place which he did not foresee, and which, in this sense, did not form a part of his original plan.

Do we join in these acclamations, and welcome the King of Israel with our Hosannas? Do we, with ardent and devout affections, exult in the blessings of his government, which brings peace to man and glory to God? And do we most earnestly pray for an extensive enlargement of his dominion, even to the ends of the earth? Such zeal as this may be termed madness and enthusiasm; and accordingly there are few who dare to express any real fervour in the cause of Christ, lest they should expose themselves to scorn and derision. But the day of his complete triumph is coming, of which his procession to Jerusalem was a faint emblem. He shall soon be revealed in all the splendour of his divine majesty; and the honours of his kingdom shall be universally acknowledged. Saints and angels shall join, with inexpressible love and transport, in everlasting acclamations to the Son of David. Would you bear a part in the joyful exultations of that day, and celebrate the high praises of your Redeemer? You must begin your song on earth, confess his glory, and pray that the purposes of his spiritual government may be fully effected within yourselves.

This profound veneration paid to Jesus, these rapturous shouts of applause, were offensive to the Pharisees. They cried out in a rage, "We prevail nothing; Behold, the world is gone after him." They

called upon him to reprehend his disciples for their officious and intemperate zeal. But he defended their conduct, maintaining that the honour due to his exalted character must be proclaimed, even though a miracle should be requisite to accomplish that end, and that, if they were to be silenced, the very stones would rise up as witnesses for him. And does not the temper of the ancient Pharisees prevail in modern times? Are there not many, who would damp the fervour and resist the vigorous efforts, of those lively Christians, who labour to advance the kingdom of Christ? He, however, will secure his own glory; for, though we and thousands more refuse to praise him, he will raise up others to do it, even such, perhaps, as may be vile and contemptible in our eyes. Let the followers of Jesus, then, indulge a holy transport, while they unite in their acclamations to Him. "Let the children of Zion be joyful in their King."

But the triumph was soon interrupted, and the Redeemer himself bathed in tears. How affecting the sight! When he approached the city, so as to take in a full view of its extent and magnificence, he felt the tenderest compassion for its unbelieving and obdurate inhabitants. Foreseeing the complicated miseries and entire desolation which awaited them, so far from exulting in their confusion and destruction, he mourned, he lamented, for them. He cried out, in the bitterness of his soul, "Oh, that thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes." He then added a clear and circumstantial prediction of the

siege and total overthrow of that infatuated place, assigning as the reason of all its calamities the indifference and neglect with which his gracious offers had been treated.

The case of Jerusalem speaks aloud to us, and calls us to examine, whether we know, or seriously attend to, "the things which belong unto our peace." It warns us not to reject or make light of the Gospel, which is calculated to secure to us both present and everlasting happiness. Soon may the "glad tidings" be withdrawn; and He, who now addresses us in terms of mercy, may appear against us as our adversary, in the thunders of his wrath. This, then, is "the time of our visitation;" for the Saviour himself waits upon us in the ministry of his word. Are we aware of the important consequences of the present moment? If salvation be despised, it will be the ground of our heaviest condemnation; and we ourselves may perish with a more terrible destruction than even the sinners of Jerusalem.

The entrance of Jesus with so singular a procession threw the whole city into commotion, and excited a general inquiry about this extraordinary Personage. Very soon he displayed the glory of his character by different proofs. He went immediately to the temple, and began, as with divine authority, to correct the abuses and punish the profanations which prevailed there. Now again, as he had done before, he drove out the traders with indignation, and vindicated the honour of that holy place, which God had chosen to himself for "the house of prayer." By fresh miracles, also, in healing the blind and the lame, he gave the strongest

evidence that he had a full right to that power which he exercised.

Were not all, then, at length convinced, and persuaded to receive him? The very children took up the song, while they cried, as if by a supernatural impulse, "Hosanna to the Son of David:" and thus their infant tongues, in celebrating the praises of the Redeemer, were witnesses against the rulers of the people. The chief priests, who ought to have been his most zealous advocates, expressed violent displeasure at these proceedings. But Jesus vindicated the acclamations of the children, and showed, from the Scriptures, that it was God's determination to get himself glory, as he did in that instance, "out of the mouth of babes and sucklings."* How should this encourage those of youngest years to offer their adorations to Jesus! It cannot be too soon for them to learn Hosannas to his name. He will listen to them with peculiar delight, and consider himself honoured by their weak attempts. Perhaps, too, he may make use of them to confound the wisest and strongest of his enemies.

The common people, likewise, were much affected by the doctrines of Jesus. While he taught them daily in the temple, they crowded to hear him, and appeared to hang upon his words. In general, the lower orders have been found to yield a serious and eager attention to the Gospel: while the rich too frequently, possessing more pride and prejudice, turn away their ears in disdain. The Jewish rulers continued to seek the destruction of Jesus; but their malice was restrained

* Psal. viii. 2.

a few days longer. As he had so many adherents among the poor, they were afraid of proceeding to any act of violence against him : nor could their efforts have at last succeeded, except he had surrendered himself into their hands. The mournful history exhibits the strongest proofs of the wickedness of man : but it affords us, also, a pleasing representation of the grace of the Saviour, waiting to show mercy to his most virulent opposers. May we be constrained, by a sense of his great love, to drop all our perverse objections to him, and yield ourselves unfeignedly to his disposal ! Thus may we be redeemed to God, and established “ unblameable in holiness” through Jesus Christ ! Amen.

J E S U S C H R I S T.

SECT. XXXII.

Jesus instructed certain inquiring Greeks—warned the unbelieving Jews—cursed a barren fig-tree—confounded those who questioned his authority—admonished them by the parable of the two sons, and by that of the vineyard, let out to unfaithful husbandmen.

A GENERAL commotion was excited in Jerusalem by our Lord's singular entrance into it, by the loud Hosannas sung before him, and by the miracles which he there publicly performed. Many persons of different dispositions came about him : some sincere inquirers sought his instruction ; but a more numerous company opposed him with extreme malignity. He varied the manner of his address, according to the cases and characters of the people ; and yet in every instance he preserved the same " meekness of wisdom." May his followers, and especially his ministers, learn from him to be " gentle unto all men," as well as to be ready always to declare " the hope that is in them !"

As the celebration of the passover approached, a large concourse of those, who professed to worship the God of Israel, was then assembled at Jerusalem from

all parts of Judea. Among the rest were certain pious Greeks, probably of Gentile extraction, who desired to be introduced to Jesus.* They applied to Philip for this purpose, and he, together with Andrew, whom he consulted on the occasion, informed Jesus of their wishes. They were immediately conducted into his presence, and the Saviour addressed them, with great solemnity, to the following effect :—

“ The Son of man, whom you now behold in circumstances of meanness, is about to enter on a state of the highest exaltation. But be not staggered, while you observe that my glory is preceded by extreme sufferings : for these are necessary to accomplish the object which I have in view, the salvation of precious souls. As the wheat springs up from the grain, which at first seems to perish in the earth, and which, except it putrify, will produce no increase ; so a numerous company shall be redeemed to God in consequence of my death, and not one of the human race can be saved without it. He also, that professes an attachment to my cause, must be willing to make the most painful sacrifices. A solicitous regard to your temporal interests will endanger your eternal welfare ; but, while you can cheerfully give up life itself for my sake, you adopt the most effectual method to secure your own happiness for ever. If, therefore, you would acknowledge me as your Lord and Master, you must be obedient to my command, and follow, without hesitation, wherever I shall lead, even to the severest calamities ; and then you shall be with me, to behold my glory, and sit down with me in

* John xii. 20, &c.

my kingdom. My Father himself will declare his approbation of your conduct, and confer distinguished honour upon you."

It is pleasing to observe that there are any humble inquirers after Jesus. His faithful ministers will rejoice to direct you, and encourage your application to him. They will, as it were, take you by the hand, and conduct you to the knowledge of him, whose acquaintance you seek: nay, he himself waits to receive you. But, while you come to him, attend to his solemn declarations. As he "hath suffered for us in the flesh," you must "arm yourselves with the same mind,"* and endure the cross. Let it suffice you, that "if you suffer, you shall also reign with him."† Is this what you object to? Do you determine to renounce the service of Christ, because it will subject you to difficulties; and resolve to gratify your own corrupt nature, because it promises you much present enjoyment? Ah! how unwise a choice, how unfair an estimate, do you make! For Jesus holds out a crown of glory to his despised and oppressed followers; but your carnal pleasures are momentary, and, if continued in, will be succeeded by endless torment and despair.

Our Lord, having adverted to his approaching sufferings, was deeply affected with the prospect; and, as if the terrors of death had fallen upon him, he cried out, "Now is my soul troubled." He seemed, for a moment, confounded in the view, and ready to petition that he might be rescued from the cross. But, whatever the weakness of human nature might suggest, he

* 1 Pet. iv. 1.

† 2 Tim. ii. 12.

resolved not to shrink from that which was the grand object of his incarnation ; and therefore he prayed only, " Father, glorify thy name." Immediately a voice from heaven declared that the divine glory had already been secured, and would yet be more signally displayed by his ministry. While the astonished multitude wondered at the sound, many of them not hearing the words distinctly, Jesus remarked that this testimony was given not for his sake, as he could want no further assurances of his Father's love, but for the confirmation of their faith.

He then exulted in the confident expectation of the blessed consequences which would result from his death. He affirmed the moment to be at hand, when by his interposition the world should be delivered from the usurped dominion of the devil, and sinners every where, of all ranks and characters, should be attracted by the view of his cross to make application to him, and enlist themselves as faithful soldiers under his banner.

This affords us an endearing representation of the Saviour. " He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth" in peevish complaints to God, or bitter invectives against man. Though he felt unutterable anguish, he expressed not the least impatience : his only prayer was, that the honour of the divine name might be exalted, whatever he might endure. Here, then, is our pattern : we should resign ourselves to the disposal of God with like meekness and unreserved submission, and be more solicitous for his glory than our own personal ease and security. Alas ! how little have we " learned Christ !" This is fully

evinced by our fretfulness, discontent, and selfishness, by our eager desire that our trials may be removed, rather than the interest of religion promoted. Have we considered that it is one grand design of the death of Christ to deliver us from all carnal affections, and from the power of darkness? Is Satan indeed cast out from the possession of our hearts? Have we by faith beheld the Son of man "lifted up from the earth," and felt the constraining influence of his cross? Are we, then, "drawn unto him," so as to acknowledge our subjection, and vow unfeigned allegiance?

Our Lord's intimation of his approaching dissolution was cavilled at by some of the people, as inconsistent with the scriptural declarations of the perpetuity of Messiah's office. But he, knowing their captious disposition, exhorted them not to trifle away their present opportunities of instruction. He warned them that the light which then shone upon them, and which was sufficient to conduct them to eternal life, would soon be removed if they refused to follow its guidance, and they would be left in a state of deplorable ignorance and sin. How solemn the admonition, and how applicable to many in modern times! Are there not those, to whom the word of salvation is sent, who show a fondness for perverse disputation, rather than an humble desire of receiving spiritual advantage? We entreat them, therefore, to consider the day of their visitation. Much of it is already gone: and has the great business of life ever yet been seriously attempted? Why need we answer this or the other question which you propose, if you are not earnestly solicitous to save your im-

mortal souls? O, take heed, lest, while you trifle,
“darkness come upon you!”

We are not informed with what effect Jesus delivered his instructions to the inquiring Greeks; but a tremendous account is given us of many of the Jews who were present on this occasion. When they began to cavil, he departed, and withdrew from them the light which they despised. They believed not on him, but obstinately resisted all that strength of evidence which he had set before them in a long train of unquestionable miracles. The Evangelist observes that the lamentation of Isaiah, complaining of the general rejection of the Saviour,* might properly be used with peculiar reference to them; and that his prophecy of the fatal judicial blindness and obduracy of the Jewish nation was accomplished at that very time.† He concluded, therefore, that their case was desperate, and that all means employed for their conversion would be ineffectual.

O, let us fear, lest we also come under the same condemnation, by an abuse of our present privileges! When sinners obstinately persist in stopping their ears against the calls of God, he determines that they shall not hear. And is not this a righteous dispensation, though the consequences be most tremendous? Who shall object? We are aware that this matter is perversely misrepresented, as if men were constrained to sin by a positive evil influence from God himself; or as if “they could not believe,” though they most eagerly designed and endeavoured to do it. This is far

* Isa. liii. 1.

† vi. 9, 10.

from the case. They are left to their own choice; and God's final desertion of them is only the just punishment of their obstinate opposition. But, when he withdraws, we know that the most confirmed unbelief will ensue. We pray, therefore, "O Lord, take not thy Holy Spirit from us!"*

Many of the Jewish rulers felt a strong conviction in their minds that Jesus was the Messiah; but they dared not avow that conviction, because a public confession of him would have brought upon them severe reproach and persecution, and they were more solicitous to preserve their reputation with men than obtain the favour of God. How wretched the case! And yet many may read in them what they themselves are. Such are those who have not courage to meet the scorn and displeasure of the world in defence of that system of doctrine and practice which they are persuaded is most agreeable to the sacred Scriptures. The approbation of God is made light of, and his anger provoked, by such a conduct. Surely we give too much consequence to our fellow-creatures, in courting their notice and dreading their anger, with the sacrifice of conscience. What will they be able to do for us in the hour of death, or in the day of judgment?

Jesus departed from them, but he took another opportunity of delivering a solemn admonition. He asserted his divine mission, and his union with the Father. He declared himself the grand Luminary of mankind, who will communicate light to all sincere inquirers, and guide their feet into the way of peace. Yet,

* Liturgy.

though the intent of his appearance on the earth was to confer salvation rather than pronounce judgment, he observed that unbelievers shall not escape, but shall be condemned in the last day by that word which they now contemptuously reject. How righteous the sentence, since they despise and oppose the will of God, so clearly manifested to them by his Son!

And as Jesus acted, so must his ministers. They too must warn sinners of their danger. Will you, then, receive the record which he hath given? He demands your attention, not only as the messenger, but as the representative, and the very image, of the invisible God. Can you disprove the credentials which he has exhibited? Or why should you resist him, who comes to rescue our fallen race from perishing, and who brings light, life, and peace, to all that believe? Do you not fear the awful doom which awaits his enemies? The Lord God will vindicate the honour of his Gospel; and, at the final consummation, you must account to him for your present neglect and contempt of it. Ah! how many will wish that they had lived and died in Pagan darkness, since the word of salvation, which is sent unto them, will witness against them, and, as it aggravates their guilt, increase their misery for ever!

Monday in Passion week. It should seem that Jesus was obliged to hide himself from the malicious attempts of his opponents, and that each evening he retired from Jerusalem to Bethany for his own comfort as well as safety.* Very early in the morning, probably on the

* Matt. xxi. 17--19. Mark xi. 11--19.

second day of the week, he returned with ardent zeal to the city, from which he had fled the night before. Having set out without taking any food, he felt the call of hunger by the way, and thus proved that he really partook of our infirmities. A fig-tree being seen at a distance, he went to it, that he might refresh himself with the fruit, which might then be expected to be on the tree, as the time of gathering the figs was not arrived. But, upon his approach, finding it barren, though its leaves afforded a fair appearance, he pronounced a curse upon it, that it never should be able to produce any increase in succeeding seasons. The effect of the imprecation was immediate: "the fig-tree withered away." We are not to ascribe our Lord's conduct upon this occasion to weakness or peevishness of spirit, such as we may betray under a painful disappointment: it was, evidently, a significant action, designed to convey some important instruction.

He exhibited therein an awful emblem of the Jewish nation, who, with all their profession and show of piety, were destitute of real goodness, and were therefore soon to be devoted to destruction. That guilty people were doomed by his curse, like the fig-tree, to be reduced from a flourishing to a desolate condition. The case of vain pretenders to religion is exactly similar. They may appear beautiful to the eye, and raise an expectation in others of much fruit: but, though they stand in the church, they bring no glory to God, and remain unprofitable. He may bear long with them; but his vengeance will fall upon them at the last, and so entirely consume them as to "leave them nei-

ther root nor branch.”* Ah! what jealousy should this excite in us respecting our own state! When the Lord himself comes to search, will any increase of holiness be found upon us?

When Jesus arrived at Jerusalem, he visited the temple, and again endeavoured to correct the flagrant violations of that sacred place, asserting its proper use, as a house devoted to the service of God. His faithful admonitions, as before, enraged the Scribes and chief priests against him, so that they wished to destroy him instantly; they observed his influence among the people, and dreaded its consequences. In the evening he once more retired from the city; a retreat apparently necessary for his security.

Tuesday in Passion week. In the morning of the day following, as he passed by the same road, his disciples, who accompanied him, expressed their astonishment when they saw the fig-tree withered away.† They perceived in this instance an additional proof of the power of their divine Master, and he taught them from it to depend more firmly upon him. He encouraged them to believe that his almighty hand would be exerted in their behalf, and that, while they relied implicitly on the promise of God, they should be enabled to confirm their doctrine by miracles far superior to this. But, that they might perform such extraordinary operations, he exhorted them to offer up importunate prayer to God, with strong faith, assuring them that their most confident expectations of the divine blessing

* Mal. iv. 1.

† Matt. xxi. 20, &c. Mark xi. 20, &c. xii. 1—12. Luke xx. 1—19.

would not be disappointed. He insisted, also, on a charitable forgiving disposition, as so absolutely requisite, that without it all their addresses to God would be ineffectual.

The supernatural powers with which they were invested are not now wanted, and it would be presumption in us to ask for them. But there are advantages and privileges more excellent and valuable which we may look for, and which we should "ask in faith, nothing wavering."* We need not wonder that our petitions for the influences of the Spirit have failed of success, if we cannot credit God for the performance of his promise, or believe that he will hear us. To insure a favourable acceptance, we should likewise lay aside our evil tempers when we approach to the God of peace and love. He will not vouchsafe his presence and assistance to those whose hearts burn with resentment one against another. We are to "lift up holy hands without wrath," as well as without "doubting."†

After passing by the barren fig-tree, our Lord came again to Jerusalem, and taught publicly in the temple. The chief priests, Scribes and elders (which expressions may denote the members of the sanhedrim), being much enraged against him, demanded of him what authority he possessed which could justify his extraordinary conduct. Had the question been proposed with an humble desire of receiving information, we apprehend that Jesus would have given a different answer; for he never disappointed the serious inquirer. But knowing

* James i. 6.

† 1 Tim. ii. 8.

the pride and obstinacy of their hearts, he intended, not so much to instruct, as to silence and confound them. He therefore interrogated them on what foundation the ministry of John the Baptist rested: for, since John had borne the most decisive testimony for him, as he himself had for John, they both stood on the same ground. This involved them in a difficulty. They could not allow the prophetic character of John without allowing that of Jesus also; and they dared not deny it, through fear of the people, who held the name of the Baptist in the highest veneration. They were, therefore, obliged to confess their ignorance, and to relinquish their malevolent examination. How admirable was that wisdom, which could at once perplex the most subtle adversaries, and defeat all their purposes!

Do not many, also, among ourselves, like those ancient cavillers, demand by what proofs the authority of Jesus is ascertained? We are not afraid of bringing the matter to a fair trial before impartial judges; for the truth cannot suffer by a serious disquisition. But take heed with what temper and motive you weigh the evidences of the Gospel. They are strong enough to convince those who are not biassed by pride or prejudice. But, if you enter upon the subject with an unhumbled captious disposition, probably difficulties will occur which will prevent your attaining any satisfaction; and it is a righteous thing with God to permit it. Many, who affect to call themselves free-thinkers, take up the Bible, with no desire to regulate their faith or practice by it, but with a previous determination to raise objections. Can such persons, who

are evidently blinded by their passions, be competent to decide upon this subject? Or is it likely, that, while they resolve not to be persuaded, Jesus will vouchsafe to guide them by the light of his Spirit?

But, though our Lord seemed to evade the inquiries of his enemies, he still warned them, by a faithful and striking representation of the baseness of their character, and by intimations which they could not mistake, of the awful destruction they should soon feel.

1. He described the different conduct of two sons, who were both directed by their father to work in his vineyard. The first, with great insolence, refused to obey; but afterwards, ashamed of his perverseness, submitted, and fulfilled the injunction. The second, with fair professions of regard, and an express promise of compliance, continued to neglect the command. Jesus then appealed to his auditors upon the case he had proposed; and, while they were obliged to confess that he, who for a time avowed an opposition to his parent's will, had yet performed a more dutiful part than the other, they condemned themselves; for, with high pretences to piety, they were more averse to God's design of saving sinners than the most open and profligate offenders. Our Lord failed not to make this very pointed application; "Verily I say unto you, That the publicans and harlots go into the kingdom of God before you." He referred them for a proof of his assertion to their rejection of John's ministry, to which persons of abandoned character had submitted.

Let all the professors of religion be excited to examine themselves. You say, "I go, Sir;" but are you

not acting as dissemblers? With declarations of love and obedience upon your tongues, are you not in your lives and tempers most opposite to God? Have you cordially complied with the scheme of salvation in the Gospel? You may pride yourselves upon your morality or devotion, as the Pharisees did; yet, if you “have not submitted yourselves unto the righteousness of God,” you possess more odious dispositions, and may be further from heaven, than those who are notoriously dissolute and profane. This is an offensive position: but here we discover the malignity and danger of self-dependence, which is more likely to prevent us from a sincere reception of the Saviour than any atrocious crimes; and we perceive, also, the freeness and sufficiency of that grace which can rescue from destruction the most enormous sinners.

This representation, however, should not be thought favourable to your licentious practices, who have avowedly cast off the fear of God. Your iniquities are detestable before him, and if not renounced, will “bring upon you swift destruction.” But we thank God for the revelation of mercy through his Son; and on this ground we can encourage you to “turn unto him, from whom you have deeply revolted.” We are, also, sanguine in the expectation of succeeding with you; for, surely, the Gospel must at once appear suitable to your case, as it is addressed to them “who are ready to perish,” and offers a full and gratuitous pardon to the most guilty.

2. He described the base conduct and certain condemnation of the Jews, in a parabolical representation

of wicked husbandmen, who were intrusted with the care of a vineyard. The owner sent his servants to demand the produce : but the messengers were treated by them with extreme violence and cruelty ; they were beaten, stoned, and killed. At last, as the grand expedient for recovering them to their duty, his only and beloved son was dispatched on the same errand : but, though he had a peculiar claim to be received with veneration, they unanimously determined to put him to death.

Jesus then appealed to his captious hearers ; and they allowed that these unfaithful husbandmen should be deprived of that trust which they had abused, and be destroyed for their iniquity. But, in doing this, being blindly inattentive to their own guilt, they passed sentence on themselves. Jesus also confirmed the sentence, declaring that the kingdom of God, or the dispensation of his mercy, should be withdrawn from them, and committed to another people. He further observed, that a remarkable prophecy was then fulfilled, since the very stone which the builders refused was appointed the head-stone of the corner, as the main support of the whole building.* And he solemnly warned them, that, by taking offence at him or his doctrine, they exposed themselves to the heaviest calamities in this life, and that finally, when his whole vengeance should fall upon them, they would perish with tremendous and irreparable ruin.

The Jewish rulers perceived that the parable which he had delivered was directed against them ; and yet the awful admonition did not duly affect them. They

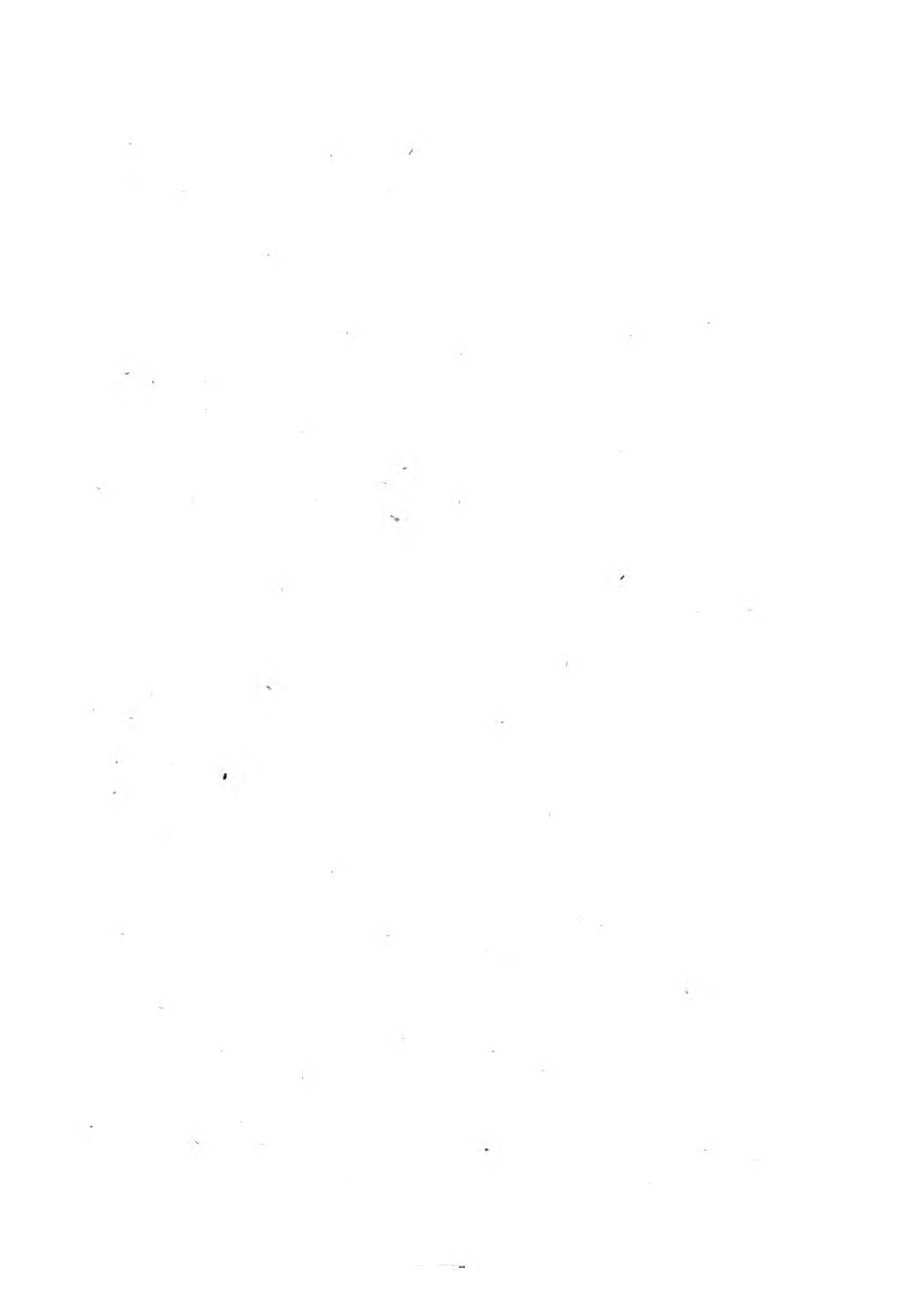
* Psal. cxviii. 22.

hardened their hearts the more, and again they sought for some means of destroying him, that they might no longer be troubled with his reproofs. At that time, however, they dared not to carry their wishes into effect: the multitude, who still revered him as a Prophet, would not suffer them to seize him. We observe that God can restrain the malicious attempts of his fiercest enemies; nor can they ever prevail, "except it be given them from above." A firm persuasion of this truth will inspire the believer with confidence and joy, though "ten thousands of people set themselves against him round about."*

The judgments denounced against the Jews have been fulfilled; and thus God hath "avenged the quarrel of his covenant." Through their unbelief "the kingdom of God" is come unto us: and if we would not provoke him to take it from us, as he has done from them, we should beware of rejecting "the chief corner-stone," which God hath laid in Zion, and on which alone, as "the sure foundation," his church can stand. Let us build our hopes upon him, and we shall never be ashamed.† But inconceivable anguish, torment, and despair, shall be the portion of all those to whom he is "a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even of them which stumble at the word, being disobedient."‡ May we so contemplate his character, that he may be more and more exalted in our estimation, till we be admitted to see his face in glory! Amen.

* Psal. iii. 6. † Rom. ix. 33. ‡ 1 Pet. ii. 8.

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