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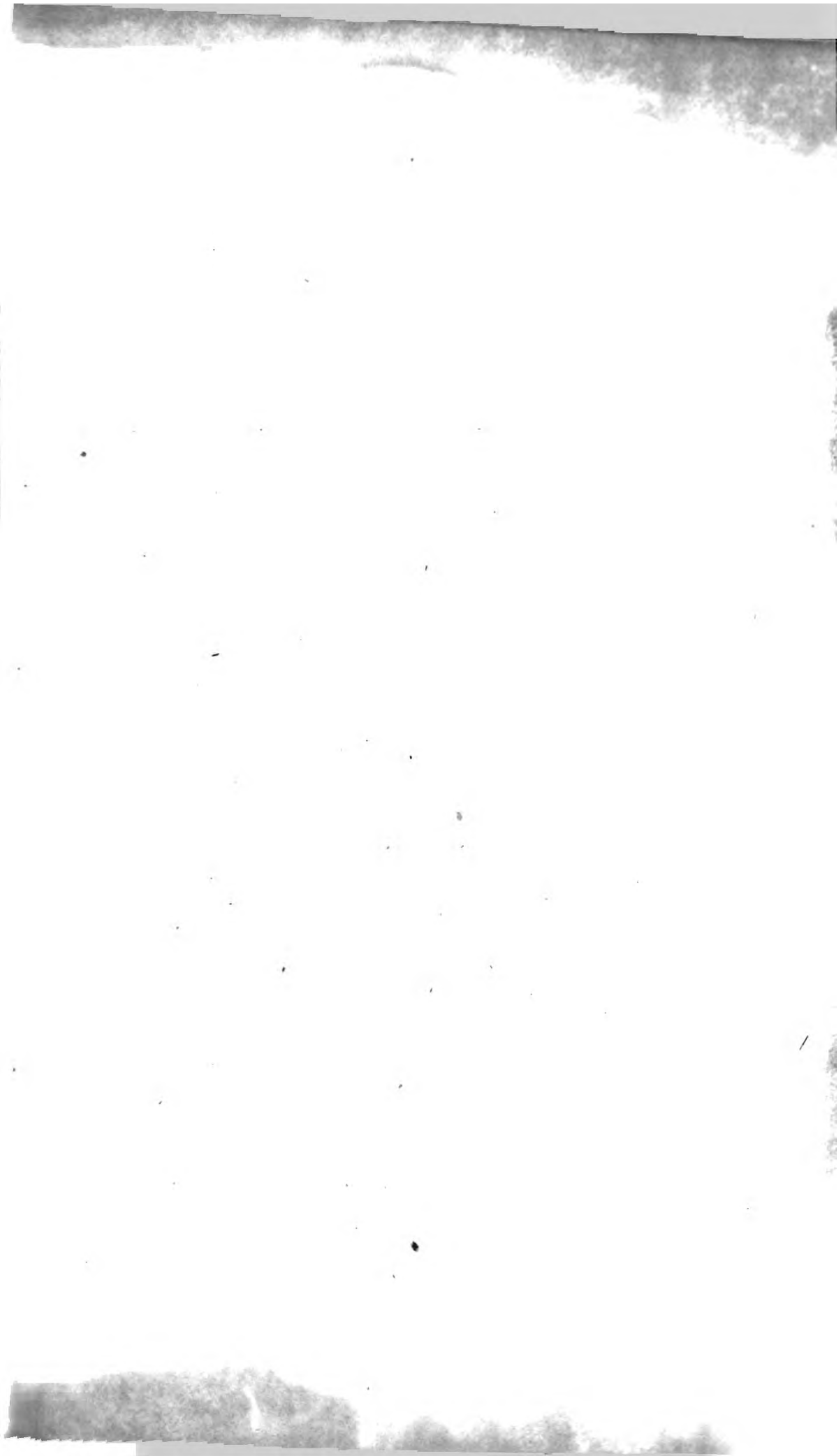
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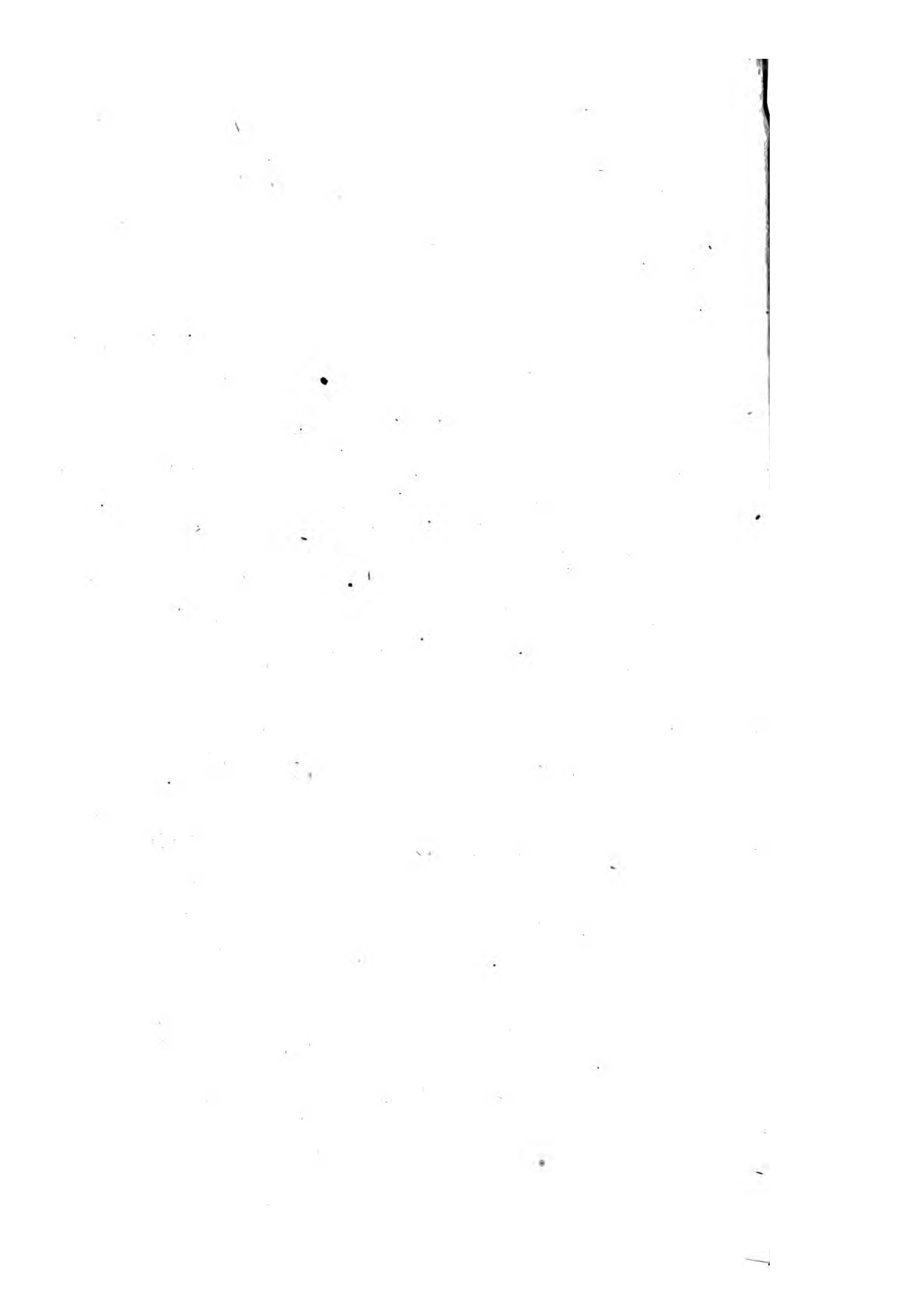


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SCRIPTURE CHARACTERS;

OR,

A PRACTICAL IMPROVEMENT

OF THE

PRINCIPAL HISTORIES IN THE

Old and New Testament.

IN FOUR VOLUMES.

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TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE.

THE TENTH EDITION;

CONTAINING A BIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT OF THE AUTHOR.

VOL. II.

SEARCH THE SCRIPTURES.—JOHN v. 39.

ALL THESE THINGS HAPPENED UNTO THEM FOR ENSAMPLES, AND
THEY ARE WRITTEN FOR OUR ADMONITION.—1 COR. x. 11.

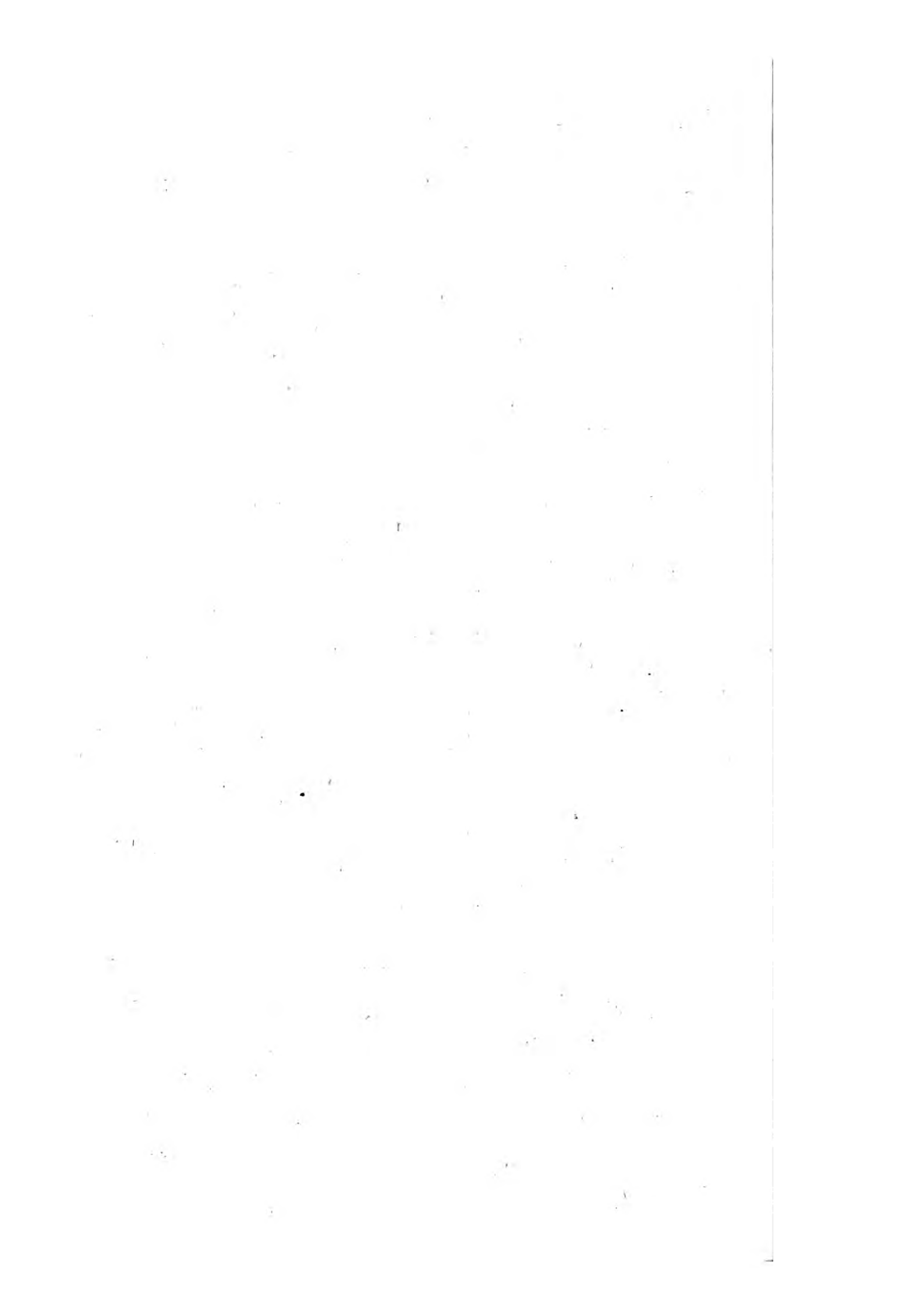


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SCRIPTURE CHARACTERS:

VOLUME THE SECOND.

CONTAINING

THE PRINCIPAL HISTORIES

FROM THE TIME OF THE JUDGES

TO THE

END OF THE OLD TESTAMENT.

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SCRIPTURE CHARACTERS.

E L I.

CHAPTER I.

Eli, high-priest and judge—rashly censured Hannah—blessed her—pleased with Samuel—unhappy in his own two sons, whom he reprov'd, but too tenderly—rebuked and threatened by the Lord—meekly submitted—trembled for the ark of God, and died upon its being taken.

THE characters of men are various; nor is it easy to assign to each his proper place. For though all will finally be ranked and treated “according to truth,” and though many, even under our own observations, discover at once their real state and dispositions, yet not a few are of so dubious a cast, that we cannot with confidence pronounce concerning them. No wonder, therefore, that cases of this kind meet us in the sacred history. Almost every example there proposed to us will furnish us with “instruction in righteousness;” but it is not necessary that we form a

decided opinion of each person whose name is recorded. Some circumstances may incline us to favour them, and others may bias our minds against them. Our sentence, however, if we should venture to deliver any, cannot affect their interest in the court of heaven, where their character is infallibly discerned, and their eternal state has long since been unalterably determined.— But we are called, not so much to sit in judgment on our fellow-creatures, as to examine our own hearts, and to learn what line of conduct we ought to pursue. While we are considering, then, the inspired account of this or that life, let us inquire, To what description do we belong? It will answer but a poor purpose to know what others are, if we be strangers to ourselves.

In passing through the different periods of Scripture history, we do not stop to contemplate every minute transaction, or investigate the character of all those to whom any reference is made; for that would lead us into a field far too extensive for our plan. But we have endeavoured to select such as are of peculiar eminence, and afford the most useful lessons of instruction. Little, indeed, is told us concerning the man to whom we now turn our attention, but we may learn much from his example. ELI, we believe, was possessed of real piety; but, though he filled a most important station, his religion did not appear in a conspicuous and honourable light. In some parts of his conduct, at least, as a parent, a magistrate, and a priest, he was shamefully remiss and negligent; on

which account he came under the displeasure of God, and his case is held out as a warning to us.

Not long after the death of Joshua, there was an awful declension in the state and character of the Israelites.* The worship of God, which had been so solemnly established, was not faithfully and uniformly maintained; and iniquity spread very rapidly amongst them. There was also much confusion in their civil polity. We observe no vigorous exertion of power, for the punishment or restraint of evil-doers; but again and again we read, that "every man did that which was right in his own eyes." The anger of the Lord, therefore, was kindled against them; and, to chastise as well as to repress their licentiousness, He repeatedly "gave them into the hand of the Heathen; and they that hated them ruled over them." Yet He did not utterly forsake them. He had compassion upon them in their distress; and frequently, by the most gracious interposition, wrought deliverance for them. He himself, indeed, preserved the supreme authority, and directed the management of all their public affairs. Their government, therefore, was properly a THEOCRACY; and their chief acting magistrate was no other than the vicegerent of God. For the space of three hundred years, their administration was, for the most part, committed to certain persons called JUDGES. These were not so much the stated rulers as occasional protectors of the people, raised up for a particular design, invested with a divine commission, and endued with wisdom, strength, and courage, to execute the purposes

* See Judges ii. 10—19.

of Heaven. They were generally made use of to effect a reformation, or to rescue the state from impending ruin. In some instances their trust ceased as soon as the object of it was accomplished ; in others it was perpetual ; and then they continued, in their respective districts, to administer justice with the full power, but not with all the pomp and splendour, of a king.— In ELI the two principal offices, civil and ecclesiastical, were united ; for he was the high-priest as well as judge of Israel for forty years.

Years before Christ, about 1156. He is first introduced in the sacred history as presiding over the divine service at Shiloh, when Hannah, the mother of Samuel, was “pouring out her soul,” with much fervour and distress, “before the Lord.”* From the agitation she discovered, Eli suspected that she had been guilty of excess, and was at the very time in a state of intoxication. Cases of this kind, probably, were common ; to such a degree did licentiousness prevail. It became him, therefore, as the minister of religion, to reprove the sin ; and accordingly he addressed himself to her in terms of severe censure. But he had formed a rash judgment, and condemned one whom he ought to have approved and comforted. How often may appearances deceive us, so as to lead us to unfavourable conclusions against the most excellent characters, and for those very parts of their conduct which are truly honourable ! It will be expedient, then, to withhold our decisions, even where some circumstances may seem to justify the

* 1 Sam. i. 1, &c.

harshest sentence, at least till the suspected persons can answer for themselves.

Eli had been precipitate, but he was open to conviction. Upon Hannah's declaring her integrity, and the nature of her situation, he readily retracted his uncharitable rebuke, and pronounced his benediction where he had thought a heavy punishment was due. Such candour in one of an exalted rank is rare. Alas ! how few are willing to acknowledge themselves mistaken, or to entertain a good opinion of those whom they have once considered as hypocrites !

The aged priest discovered an affectionate regard to the parents of Samuel, for devoting their first-born son to the service of the Lord.* He blessed them and prayed for them. This attention to them, on a religious account, was a mark of real piety. We cannot give a stronger evidence of unfeigned love to God than by manifesting an uniform and disinterested love to those who are most zealous for His glory.

Eli was pleased with the ministry of young Samuel, who delighted in the sanctuary, to which he was dedicated from his infancy. But what a contrast did he behold in his own offspring, Hophni and Phinehas ! They, indeed, were admitted into the priesthood, and, by their profession and office, were employed about holy things. But they " were sons of Belial ; they knew not the Lord ;" that is, they were men of a fierce and profane disposition ; and, though appointed to instruct others in the true knowledge of God, they

* 1 Sam, ii. 20.

were themselves utter strangers to it. This description is remarkable. Considering their education, and the sacred trust committed to them, we might have expected a different character. Eli, we presume, had endeavoured to instil into their minds the principles of religion, and, by his own example, as well as by earnest exhortation, had directed them to the practice. In such a post as they sustained, they could not but understand something of revelation, and the externals, at least, of the divine service. They worshipped in the tabernacle, and observed the rites and ceremonies of the law; and yet "they knew not the Lord."

With the best advantages of human learning, and under the strongest obligations to acquaint themselves with God, men may remain in entire ignorance of Him. The reason is obvious. A spiritual illumination, and the continual influence of grace, are necessary to fix and maintain right sentiments in the heart. We may be descended from excellent parents, brought up under their care, their instructions, and their prayers, and placed in the most sacred offices, as teachers of others; and yet, possibly, we know not the Lord. O let us not rest in any outward privileges, but earnestly solicit those communications from Heaven, without which we shall "know nothing as we ought to know."

We commiserate the unhappiness of Eli, in having such an offspring. This indeed must have been a trial of the most distressing nature. For what is it that good men desire, next to their own salvation, but that they may "bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord," and see them steadfastly per-

severe in the way of righteousness? They, who are intrusted with that important charge, should be most fervent and unceasing in their application to God, that He would sanctify by his Spirit those whom He has committed to their care. Together with their ardent prayers, they should use all suitable means, information, admonition, and correction, nor ever remit their diligence and attention. It is true, that, after all their exertions, their hopes may be disappointed; for it is not in their power to bestow that influence of the divine grace, which alone can be effectual. But let them not be deterred from the faithful discharge of their duty. In dependence on the promises of God, they may expect that their labours of love shall not be in vain. Some awful cases, indeed, like that before us, have occurred, which are permitted, probably, in order that none may presume upon their own piety, and that the work of conversion may more evidently appear to be of God. But most commonly, where the children of good men are "sons of Belial, and know not the Lord," something or other has been wrong or defective in the conduct of the parents. This very censure we are compelled to pass upon Eli.

His two sons were guilty of the most flagrant abuses of the service of the tabernacle, and, through their shameless violations of their office, they brought religion into contempt. They were haughty and imperious in their carriage; and, for the gratification of their own sensual appetites, with violent and rapacious hands they seized on any parts of the sacrifices which they

chose. The consequence was what might have been apprehended ; the divine ordinances were neglected, despised, and hated, and men were confirmed and hardened in their profaneness while they beheld these enormities in the sanctuary. Such will ever be the effect of an ignorant, careless, and wicked priesthood. Not being restrained in their extortion and their luxury, they proceeded to still further iniquity, and made use of that influence, which their character and employment gave them, in order to seduce the women, who for various purposes were engaged about the holy place. What aggravated guilt was this ! We cannot conceive any sins more heinous in their nature, or more destructive in their tendency.

But where was Eli,—the father,—the high-priest,—the judge ? Could he be acquainted with these abominations, committed in the very house of God ? And did he not interpose his authority for the prevention of them ? Did he not reprove, repress, and punish ? It is obvious that it was incumbent upon him to vindicate the honour of religion, though it had been by the degradation of his own sons. But here, alas ! we discover a disgraceful neglect of duty. Though he did not countenance these horrid practices, he was timid, inactive, and averse to trouble ; and, probably, having been accustomed to indulge his children from their youth, he had resigned all his authority to them. At length, however, he was roused from his stupor : the abuses were so public, the outcry against them so general, and their fatal effects through the land so glaring, that he could no longer be silent. He admonished,

he reprehended the offenders, and that too with words of the greatest seriousness. He solemnly called upon them to answer to the charges brought against them, and represented the heinousness and the danger of their conduct. He warned them that they were accessory to the sins of others, who were encouraged by their example; that their transgressions, being committed in violation and contempt of every thing sacred, were directly levelled against God himself; and therefore that it would be vain and presumptuous even to attempt any mediation in their behalf.

This would have been an affecting address to persons of any moral sensibility. But it had been delayed so long, that the young men were become obdurate; and their guilt was so atrocious, that the Lord, in vindication of his own cause, determined to take vengeance. Therefore, being given up to themselves, they utterly despised the father's caution. The reproof, however, which was too mild for the occasion, argued a very blameable remissness. The sinner, who is censured in a slight manner, is thereby more confirmed in his offences, as being induced to think favourably of them. But the case was, Eli was content with reprimanding, when he ought to have done more. The sharpest language should not have sufficed him; but, by a vigorous exertion of his authority, he should have brought the criminals to justice. The restraint not only came too late, but it was, even then, weak and ineffectual. Through a foolish fondness for his children, he did not punish them; and thus it appeared that he was not properly concerned for the

honour of God, and for the interest of religion in his country.

We lament that even a good man should forget his place, and not faithfully employ the power committed to him. Yet, we fear, instances of this kind are frequent. It will become us to inquire, not only whether we discountenance sin by our example and our advice, but whether we are doing our utmost to prevent it. How extensive is your duty, who are intrusted with the care of others, and are, in a measure, responsible for their conduct! Parents, ministers, and magistrates, the influence you possess is given you, not for your own sake, but for the direction and restraint of those who are under you; and, if it be not exercised with a supreme regard to the glory of God, He will require it at your hands. While you are remiss and negligent, you may be complimented, perhaps, as benevolent, candid, and indulgent; but you betray your trust, and may be accessory to the crimes and to the ruin of thousands.

The offence of Eli, and its awful consequences, are more clearly marked in the sequel. Sin is a contempt of God, and an opposition to His government: it overturns the order which He has established, and introduces confusion into the world. It is therefore the object of his abhorrence, and, by his righteous appointment, for the vindication of his own authority, it draws after it, even here, a long train of the most tremendous calamities. Those, who are dearest to Him, cannot wilfully violate a plain command, without feeling, most painfully, the effect of his displeasure; and

their descendants are often brought into deepest distress through their folly.

A prophet was sent with an express commission, as an immediate messenger from God, to reprove the judge and the high-priest of Israel. In that solemn address, pronounced as from the Lord himself, Eli was reminded of the distinguished favour conferred upon his family, and of their base ingratitude in abusing their privileges to the vilest purposes. He was charged as an accomplice in the iniquity of his sons, because he had not been active to prevent it. He was condemned for "honouring them more than God," because, through a foolish regard to their interest or reputation, he had not degraded them from their office, but had suffered them to bring the house and ordinances of God into contempt. It was, therefore, declared to be the Lord's fixed determination to spoil them of their glory, of which the fond father had been so tender. He was told, that, in consequence of that profaneness which had prevailed through his remissness, he should be witness to the desolation of the sanctuary, and to a terrible destruction, both of the people in general, and of his own household in particular;—that he should soon be deprived of that power, which he had neglected to use according to the duties of his station;—that his posterity should be reduced to the most abject condition, and die in the flower of their age;—and that his two children, whom he had spared, should by one awful visitation be cut off together.

What effect was produced in Eli, by these tremendous denunciations, we are not informed. Probably

he had lost all control over his wicked sons, or was grown too infirm to make the necessary exertions. It should seem, at least, that no amendment took place: and it is thought that some years elapsed, during which the divine judgments were delayed; and, perhaps, a hope of impunity might be entertained. At length, however, the same declarations of vengeance were repeated, and young Samuel was commissioned to reprove the aged priest.* The Lord appeared to the child, and expressed his firm resolution to execute the sentence which he had already pronounced upon Eli and his house, and which no sacrifice or mediation would be able to avert or mitigate. The sin of the old man was, in this prediction, clearly described; and it was alleged as the principal cause of those heavy calamities which should soon ensue, that "his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not."

And here let us pause, that we may attend to the warning which his example suggests. Let each one, then, consider, and faithfully discharge, the duties of his proper calling. In our different stations, we are appointed to important services, which demand our constant care. Has not the Lord a special claim upon us, on account of peculiar distinctions, bestowed upon us, or our families? Are we not unmindful of his favours; and do we not, by our ingratitude, provoke him to withdraw them? Many persons fill places of trust, and possess various talents, into the management of which a strict inquiry will be made,

* 1 Sam. iii, 1, &c.

Need we remind them that God should be glorified by a diligent improvement of all his gifts? Let them beware of honouring the nearest connexions in life above Him. While they prefer the advancement of His cause to every worldly consideration, and are willing to do or suffer any thing, so that He may be exalted, they are most likely to secure respect to themselves. But if, through covetousness, pride, or cowardice, they are more concerned for their own support and promotion than for the interest of religion, they will probably sink into contempt among those very persons whose regard they are most solicitous to obtain. For God hath declared it to be his general rule of proceeding, "Them that honour me, I will honour; and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed."

A particular kindness, we allow, is due to children, for they have an indisputable claim to a large share of our affections. But, if we resign our authority to them, and permit them to follow their own devices without restraint, we are admonished by this history that we shall provoke God, betray his cause, strengthen the hands of the wicked, and bring a curse upon ourselves. Let us call the attention of indulgent parents. How are your houses governed? Are not your sons, or your daughters, "making themselves vile?" Examine their conduct, and their tempers. Are not you answerable for their ignorance, ambition, extravagance, and profaneness? Have you done all in your power to prevent, or to correct, those abuses in them, which are an offence to the church of God? Are you not

partakers of Eli's guilt, because "you restrained them not?"

You reply, perhaps, "We have seen the bad effects of severity, and our tender regard for our offspring will not allow us to adopt any rigid discipline." That is, you spare the rod, and hate the child; and, as Solomon expresses it, you will not "deliver his soul from hell."* Do you believe the depravity of our nature; and do you not therein perceive the necessity of something more than instruction and advice? The vicious inclinations and vain schemes of young people must be opposed and repressed; and you are intrusted with authority for that very purpose.—Are you aware of the destructive consequences of sin, both here and for ever? Surely, then, you will exert your utmost strength to preserve or to rescue those who are committed to your care. Otherwise talk not of your love to them: for to leave them to their own management is cruelty of the most horrid kind. By indulging their folly and vanity, you will most effectually defeat your own plans for their advancement in life. Probably, through your fondness, they may be reduced to infamy and distress; and reproach and misery may be entailed upon your posterity for ages yet to come. Nay, did you consult only your present comfort, you would "have your children in subjection;" for, so long as their violence of temper is unrestrained, your houses must be full of strife and confusion. But, more than this, the curse of God will follow them; and, could your eyes behold all that sin and wretchedness, which

* Prov. xiii. 24. xxiii. 14.

may arise from your weakness and negligence, it would be more than your hearts could endure.

But, while we censure the misconduct of Eli, we must vindicate his integrity: for there are circumstances in this history which discover an unfeigned piety. It must have mortified the aged priest, not only to hear the denunciations of God against himself and his family, but to receive the tremendous sentence by the mouth of young Samuel, to whom the divine revelations were then made in preference to him. Yet we are struck with his meek deportment in that most afflicting situation. We perceive no risings of envy, anger, or impatience; but, on the contrary, an unreserved submission to God, and a perfect acquiescence in the wisdom, justice, and goodness of his severest dispensations. He appears to have been suitably affected under a conviction of his guilt, and, as a true penitent, to have cast himself at the feet of his offended God, not daring to request a mitigation of the punishment. He said, "It is the Lord; let him do what seemeth him good."—Here was no plea offered, to excuse or to extenuate his fault; he complained not of the rigour of his sentence, but surrendered himself to the disposal of his Judge, from a full persuasion of His sovereignty, righteousness, and grace.—"IT IS THE LORD: and, as He is the Almighty Governor, it is not for me to contend with Him, or to ask, What doest thou? He has an absolute right over me, and may, therefore, deal with me, according to the counsel of his own will; nor shall I have any reason to murmur, whatever I may suffer; for, as he is just and

holy, my punishment will be no greater than I deserve. I have forfeited every claim to His regard; but, so extensive is His kindness, that I may yet hope in his mercy. I will, at least, refer the matter to Him, and leave myself in His hands : LET HIM DO WHAT SEEMETH HIM GOOD.”

Such an entire resignation we consider as a very favourable mark. Thus Aaron, in a situation somewhat similar, when his two sons were slain in their impiety by fire from the Lord, discovered the same meekness of temper : “ He held his peace.”*—So, likewise, the pious Hezekiah, when threatened with the heavy judgments of God, replied, “ Good is the word of the Lord.”†—Let these, then, be proposed as patterns of patience, humility, and faith, to them who are suffering any grievous calamities through the displeasure of a holy God. But do we perceive no peevishness and anger in persons so circumstanced? Do we hear from them no loud complaints, no bitter accusations against the Lord? We would ask them, From whom does your affliction proceed? Does it become you to quarrel with His appointment? Or can you not account for this treatment? Has there been nothing in your spirit or conduct to merit it? O, consider in whose hands you are! Submit to his authority; acknowledge his justice; be encouraged to hope in his mercy, and to depend upon his faithfulness in Christ Jesus. He says, “ Be still; and know that I am God.”‡ From a remembrance of your sinfulness,

* Lev. x. 3. † 2 Kings xx. 19. ‡ Psal. xlvi. 10.

let your mouths be stopped, while, like Job, you “abhor yourselves, and repent in dust and ashes.”

Years before Christ, about 1116. We hasten to the close of this history which is most affecting. Some time after the denunciation of wrath against Eli, there was war between the Israelites and the Philistines, and the enemies of the Lord's people were permitted to prevail.* Confounded by this defeat, the elders of Israel, with a mixture of ignorance and presumption, proposed that the ark of God should be sent for into the camp; like all other hypocrites, trusting to the outward token of the Lord's presence, instead of humbling themselves before Him in penitence and prayer. The impious sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, with an insolent profaneness, conducted the ark to the field of battle. The most confident expectations of victory were entertained: but, alas! what could be looked for in such an enterprise? Eli, probably, had not been consulted, or not regarded, on that occasion: and it appears that he was filled with terrible apprehensions for the consequence. Every thing dear depended on the contest. Their liberty, their religion, and their lives, were all at stake. What anxiety must have possessed those especially who were concerned for the honour of God, when they saw the symbol of His favour to Israel exposed to the assaults of the Heathen! Such was Eli: He had much to fear for himself, much for his country, much for his children; but every other thought was swallowed up in his solicitude for the glory of God. “He sat upon a seat by the

* 1 Sam. iv. 1, &c,

way-side, watching ; for his heart trembled for the ark of God." At length the cry of distress was heard, upon the arrival of a messenger, who thus related to him the fatal event of the battle : " Israel is fled before the Philistines, and there hath been also a great slaughter among the people ; and thy two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God is taken."

What grievous tidings were these ! It must have pierced the heart of the good old man to be informed of the slaughter of Israel, and especially of the destruction of his sons, who were cut off in their sins. But these considerations were outweighed by others still more afflictive. It was the close of the melancholy account which excited the keenest anguish. " The ark of God was taken : " the Philistines thereby seemed to triumph over the God of Israel ; the divine ordinances were removed ; and all that was most valuable was lost. Add to this, also, the painful reflection, that the whole had been brought about by his own neglect of duty. This was more than he could bear. " When mention was made of the ark of God," in the excess of his sorrow, unable to support himself, " he fell backward, and his neck brake, and he died," having attained the age of ninety-eight years, during forty of which he had judged Israel.

This was a death most awful, and yet it may be highly instructive. We perceive the strongest love and zeal for God, even in his last moments. Alas ! where shall we find such an ardent concern of religion as prevails above all other considerations ? In times of

public calamity we fear for ourselves, for our families, and for our country. But who trembles for the ark of God? How many would be unaffected, though the sanctuary should be profaned, and trodden down by an enemy? WE are favoured with the Gospel: but it is treated with contempt. We need not wonder, then, if it should be taken from us: and to many persons, even this, the heaviest of all misfortunes, would occasion no grief. There are multitudes around us whom any other profession would please as well as that of Christianity. But we rejoice that there are also those who value the house, the word, and the ministry of God, above their richest possessions; and who dread the loss of these blessings more than death itself. "O, pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee." O, pray that God would arise, and maintain his own cause; that his truth "may have free course, and be glorified." Pray, that, as "a token for good," our spiritual privileges may be continued: for the ark of God is the bulwark of the land.

Eli, we have seen, gave evidence of his piety, even in the manner of his departure. But it should not be forgotten that he died by the judgment of God, and under strong marks of His displeasure. We doubt not that he had obtained forgiveness: but he was made to know and feel, "that it is an evil thing and bitter" to transgress a plain duty; and he stands as an admonition to us, that we do not "the work of the Lord deceitfully." It is possible, then, that, good men may close their life miserably, and even ignominiously, on

account of past negligence, and as a punishment for their misconduct. Their sun may set under a cloud, and yet not be put in final darkness.

Is it asked, Why should God chasten them so severely? It may be replied, He is God, and will do what is right; and though for the present we may not discover the reasons of his dispensations, He will make them clear at the last. But the obvious answer is, He corrects his children because he loves them, and in order that he may purify them to himself.* By such a tremendous visitation, beginning at his own sanctuary, he represents the odiousness of sin; in a convincing light he warns his people to walk circumspectly, and proclaims an alarm to careless sinners, that they may consider their danger. For, "if judgment begin at the house of God, what shall the end be of them that obey not the Gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" †

* Prov. iii. 12. Amos iii. 2. † 1 Pet. iv. 17, 18.

S A M U E L.

CHAP. II.

Samuel, granted to the prayers of his mother—his conduct and employment, when young—sent to reprove Eli—as a prophet, instructed and prayed for the people—his integrity and diligence—distressed by his sons—rejected by the people—anoined Saul—reproved and condemned him—grieved for him—anoined David—founded schools—died in peace.

THE word of God is a book of universal direction, inasmuch as it suggests suitable counsel to men of all ranks, and in all the various situations of life. If we possess sincerity of heart toward God, and an unfeigned desire to please Him, it will not be difficult to discover, from the different examples as well as precepts of holiness, what He would have us to do, in that particular place which he has assigned us. But, if we are destitute of such a disposition, it is not probable that we shall receive any real advantage from the reading of the Scripture. While, therefore, we are engaged in this employment, let us not forget to lift up our prayer, that we may learn, from the conduct of ancient saints, what is incumbent upon ourselves; and, even by this distant converse with them, may contract a measure of their various excellencies,

A character is now to be exhibited, which may at the same time humble us for our sad deficiencies, and excite us to greater fervour and activity in the service of God. SAMUEL will appear in an amiable light, on whatever part of his life we fix our attention : for we shall find him upright, meek, and devout, from his very childhood, and discharging even to old age, with diligence and fidelity, the important offices which he sustained. Perhaps we may not be called to so exalted a rank, to so conspicuous a station, or to such extensive usefulness as he was ; but if we be influenced by the same spirit, like him we shall be a public blessing in our place and generation.

Years before Christ, about 1156. He was descended, by his father Elkanah, from the tribe of Levi, which was set apart for the work of the sanctuary. There were some circumstances attending his birth, which raised the expectation of his being an extraordinary person. He was a child of prayer, granted in answer to the fervent supplications of his pious mother, Hannah, and named SAMUEL, which is interpreted " ASKED OF GOD," in remembrance of the divine condescension to her requests. He was, also, dedicated as a Nazarite to the Lord, from his infancy, according to his mother's vow. For as soon as he was weaned, it is supposed about three years old, he was presented to the Lord in His tabernacle at Shiloh, with much religious solemnity, and there left to be employed in His service, under the care and direction of Eli.*

* 1 Sam. i. 1, &c.

What could be his peculiar work, at so tender an age, we are not told. He was instructed in good principles, and taught to call upon the Lord. In some way or other he assisted in the offices of public worship, according to his abilities, constantly attended upon the aged priests, and observed their commands.* This ready obedience, in however small concerns it was made use of, being performed from a regard to God, and a desire to please Him, was graciously accepted even from a child; and, in consequence thereof, the divine blessing rested upon him in a very remarkable manner. His delight in the ordinances of God was manifest to all; his strength of body and vigour of mind, probably, surpassed his years; he enjoyed the friendship of his God, and his very amiable tempers conciliated the esteem of men. With a superior understanding and much ardour of devotion, he was not forward or assuming, but meek and teachable, diligent in his appointed work, respectful and submissive in his deportment to his tutor, whom, for his infirmities and remissness in duty, he might have been tempted to despise. He was surrounded by bad examples, and from his situation necessarily connected with the sons of Eli, through whose profaneness "men abhorred the offering of the Lord." Yet, untainted by the general contagion, he appeared eminently holy; and a very striking contrast is pointed out between him and those wicked ministers. While they were advancing from one degree of impiety to another, He "grew on" in knowledge, piety, and zeal, "and the Lord was with him."

* 1 Sam. ii. 11, 18, 26.

Years before Christ, about 1144. At an early period, he received unequivocal marks of the approbation of Heaven.

He was favoured with an express revelation, and not only preferred to the high-priest, but even commissioned from God to carry a most solemn reproof to him.* While the young man was ready to attend to the call of Eli, by night as by day, the Lord condescended to address him by an audible voice, and to inform him of those tremendous judgments which were soon to be executed on the family of that very person to whom he ministered. Such a communication must have been considered as a peculiar honour put upon him; but he seems not to have been elated with it. He still maintained a constant regard to the work of his station, performing the necessary services of the tabernacle: and so far was he from shewing any contempt of Eli, for the heavy charge brought against him, that, through tenderness and veneration for his office, he was extremely unwilling to relate the substance of the vision. Yet his modest reserve gave way to a sense of duty, and, when pressed to it by his aged master, he was faithful and impartial in acquainting him with every circumstance in the divine threatenings.

How much have we to learn from this part of the example! Young persons, in particular, are requested seriously to contemplate the piety of Samuel, and they will be instructed from him to "remember their Creator in the days of their youth." It is often supposed that children are incapable of religion. But many cases, of indisputable authority, contradict the notion.

* 1 Sam. iii. 1, &c.

Jeremiah, Daniel and his three companions, Timothy, and Samuel, were all eminent for a spirit of devotion at a tender age; and instances of a similar kind may also be produced in modern times. We should, therefore, be encouraged to apply to God for our infant offspring, bring them, as soon as may be, to His house, and dedicate them to Him. They can understand and retain some of the most important principles, in which they ought to be instructed, and they are susceptible of good impressions at an earlier period than is commonly imagined. They should be taught to worship the Lord, as far as their faculties will permit; and, while they are presented to Him, His blessing may rest upon them, and engage their hearts to enter with ardour into his service.

Upon this subject we should bespeak the attention of children. We refer you to Samuel for a proof, that your waiting on the Lord will be pleasing to Him, and for a pattern of all those amiable tempers, which will be your brightest ornament, and a sure source of happiness. Learn from the young Prophet not only to be devout, but at the same time to be humble, modest, and respectful in your behaviour toward your superiors, notwithstanding any defects you may perceive in their conduct. Be diligent in your place, and you will, probably, be raised to greater privileges, and increase in wisdom and in every good attainment, as you increase in stature and in years. This example will teach you a meek and obedient regard to the call of God; so that, in whatever way his commands be made known, you will say, "Speak, Lord; for thy servant heareth."

Samuel will remind you, that, if you be favoured above many of your equals, or even preferred to some of longer standing in the church of God, you ought not to be conceited and overbearing, or to despise any, though justly set aside for their negligence. But your modesty, and your tender concern for others, must not tempt you to be unfaithful to them. Your duty to God may require you to do that which is very painful to your own feelings; nor should fear, or partiality to your friends, induce you to conceal any one circumstance which it is incumbent upon you to declare to them.

From that period Samuel continued to receive such divine communications as fully proved to the whole kingdom of Israel that "he was established to be a Prophet of the Lord." These revelations, confirmed by the strongest evidence, he delivered to the people, and thus performed among them the office of a preacher, with great zeal and usefulness. Yet he lived in a time of extreme degeneracy. He saw the ark of God carried into an enemy's land, Shiloh deprived of the public ministrations of religion, with which it had been favoured three hundred years, and the ordinances interrupted for a long season. In that dark interval, the nation appeared to be sunk in ignorance and profaneness. But at last a glorious and extensive revival took place, probably through the unwearied labours of the Prophet.

"All the house of Israel," being brought to a deep sense of their loss, "lamented after the Lord:"* they

* 1 Sam. vii. 2, &c.

mourned for His departure, and earnestly wished for the restoration of their former privileges. This was the very effect which Samuel had endeavoured to produce ; and with great eagerness he seized the opportunity of pressing the matter upon their consciences, that they should not rest in professions, but evidence their sincerity by an immediate renunciation of idolatry, and a solemn dedication of themselves to the true God. Nor did he preach in vain : the whole kingdom seemed unanimous in returning to the pure worship of God. But Samuel was desirous to confirm their vows, and to bind them still more closely by a peculiar solemnity. A general congregation, therefore, was called together at Mizpeh, that they might enter into an express engagement to serve the Lord alone, and might seek His blessing, by sacrifice, fasting, and prayer.

When the people were assembled, agréably to his wishes, he conducted their devotions. He was then also acknowledged as their supreme civil magistrate, and, from that time at least, presided over them as their judge. But, in the midst of these religious transactions, they were suddenly attacked by their adversaries the Philistines, and filled with terror. Their very distress, however, convinced them of the worth of Samuel, and of the advantage of relying wholly on the Lord. They were urgent with the Prophet to intercede for them ; and, while he appeared as their mediator, with a burnt-offering and with earnest supplication, deliverance was vouchsafed to them, and in such a way as to prove that their salvation was of God.

The Philistines, confounded by a most remarkable storm of thunder from heaven, fell an easy prey to the Israelites. The memory of this very signal victory was preserved by a monument, which Samuel erected, and to which he gave the significant title of EBENEZER, saying, "Hitherto hath the Lord helped us."

Under his care and government, the Israelites were secure, happy, and prosperous. For, during his administration, their enemies no more dared to renew their hostilities : and, according to the power he possessed, he was invariably and strictly attentive to their interests. As a judge, he conducted their civil affairs with fidelity and diligence, and by regular circuits executed justice, and preserved good order through the land. And as the minister of religion, in the place of his stated residence, he called them to the worship of the true God : for "there he built an altar," at which, doubtless, public ordinances were celebrated, though Shiloh was deserted.

We are constrained to acknowledge, that a character like Samuel must be a blessing to any nation, and merits universal regard. Yet we observe, from this instance, that the best of men, with the most eminent abilities, as well as zeal and integrity, may seem to labour in vain, during a long season, for the advancement of truth and righteousness. Notwithstanding their continued exertions, the state of things around them may rapidly advance from bad to worse. But, even in such dark and distressing times, let them not remit their diligence, or abate their ardour : as spiritual husbandmen, they should still "sow in hope." Let them water

their seed with much prayer to God, and it shall not be lost. They themselves may live to see it spring up, and produce a glorious harvest ; or, if not, posterity may reap the benefit. Their work is with the Lord ; and they may cheerfully expect, that, in answer to their fervent petitions, He will arise to plead his own cause. The ministers of Christ, especially, should watch the favourable moment when good impressions appear, and then redouble their assiduity, in order to confirm and establish any serious convictions and desires in their people. Thus, perhaps, a real change may be effected amongst them, and their professions of religion rendered solid and abiding.

O for such a revival in our own day ! O that God would pour out his Spirit abundantly, upon those in the first place who are intrusted with authority, both in the church and state ! For if men of this description would exert their influence and abilities, a brighter prospect would soon open upon us. But reformation is not the concern of governors alone : it is the duty and interest of all to promote it. And were individuals, though of less extensive power and in private life, to unite their endeavours for this purpose, very much might be done. But where is the zeal of our fathers ? Ah ! what a stupor has benumbed our souls ! To be active for the honour of God and the salvation of mankind, is now a reproachful thing. But will not God require it at our hands ? What should be your conduct who have children and servants under your control ? Will you not be chargeable with their ignorance and profaneness ? If you fear that your pains

would be lost, you should try, at least, whether something might not be effected. Whatever be the event, it is incumbent upon you to perform your part : instruct, exhort, warn, reprove, and punish, as the case may demand ; and then leave the consequence with God.

You too, who have no influence with man, may yet prevail by your applications at the throne of grace. Come, and use your interest with God ; pray, like Samuel, for the people of the land : and you may do more for them than the mightiest armies can. “ The prayer of a righteous man ” is as effectual now as it was in ancient days ; and therefore, by means of your intercessions, public calamities may be averted, our fiercest enemies confounded, and all their schemes defeated.

Years before We return to Samuel, and behold him, at
Christ, about
1096. an advanced age, much tried and distressed.

On account of his own infirmities he had taken his two sons to be his assistants in the government.* But these were very unlike their father, having no fear of God or concern for the general good. Through covetousness, and other base principles, they perverted justice, were venal and oppressive. This must have been a painful affliction to the Prophet ; and yet we have no right to ascribe it to any blameable conduct in him. We are not told that he had neglected their education, or acted improperly in putting them into their office. Perhaps they had appeared hopeful in earlier life and in a private station, and, seduced by the temp-

* 1 Sam. viii. 1, &c.

tations of power and of wealth, had departed from former professions, and deceived the expectations of their pious parent. This, at least, we know to have occurred in other cases. Some of the most excellent characters have had the extreme calamity of seeing their dear children, unmindful of all their instructions, prayers, and examples, turn out dissolute and abandoned, even after having discovered very promising signs of real religion. The Lord is not accountable to us for the disposal of his favours. But, from his general providence, and the gracious declarations of his word, you have reason to look for his blessing upon your offspring, while you are faithfully discharging your duties. And, though you should seem to gain no advantage with them for the present, they may hereafter remember your admonitions and entreaties to good purpose, and, through the prevalence of your intercessions, may be recovered to God, when you are sleeping in the dust. At any rate, you must exert your utmost endeavours, and then be satisfied under this persuasion, that "The Judge of all the earth will surely do right."

The people, disgusted by the misconduct of Samuel's sons, desired a change of government, and petitioned that a king might be set over them with the same pomp as in other countries. They had some cause for complaint; but their request, probably, arose from a discontented and ambitious spirit, and discovered much ingratitude towards Samuel, under whose administration they had enjoyed peculiar blessings. He considered it as a contempt put upon himself; but, instead of reproaching them, he made known his distress unto the

Lord. The Prophet, however, was reminded, that Israel had rejected, not him only, but the God of heaven, by whose immediate appointment and continual direction their polity had been conducted. He was therefore instructed to yield to their desires, after having solemnly protested against their plan, and warned them of the consequences. His admonitions were heard with attention and respect : but, when he saw them bent upon a change, he no longer opposed their wishes.

This history may tend to lower our proud expectations, and teach us not to depend upon human favour. For we observe, that men of the first abilities, of eminent piety, and of extensive usefulness, may live to be neglected, and be set aside by the very persons who have derived singular advantages from their labours. But let those who lament that they are injuriously slighted by their fellow-creatures, like Samuel, commend their cause to God, and He will counsel, support, and comfort them.

A distinguished honour was still put upon the Prophet, even in the sight of the people ; for their very king received his appointment from him. It was intimated to him by revelation, that Saul, who was in a wonderful manner conducted to him, was to be invested with the government ; and therefore, without hesitation, he anointed him to the regal office.* It is pleasing to behold his disinterestedness, his respect and kindness, toward the man to whom he was about to resign his authority. He entertained him, gave him all necessary instructions for discharging the duties of his exalted station ; and, pouring the consecrating oil

* 1 Sam. ix. 1, &c.

upon him, kissed him, in token of his submission and affection.*

What had been done in private was soon afterwards ratified in public. He solemnly assembled the people at Mizpeh, and, after he had faithfully reproved them for their ingratitude in rejecting the divine administration, he pointed out their king to them, and declared what should be the form and the rules of their civil constitution in future.

Upon another occasion, also, after Saul's conquest of the Ammonites, when the nation was better affected towards the new ruler, Samuel took the opportunity of establishing the kingdom in his hands, and of binding his subjects to him by the sacred rites of religion.† Then likewise, in a most animated address, he called upon the whole congregation to avow their objections, if they had any, against himself; but, to a man, they were all compelled to acknowledge his integrity. This appeal, it should seem, was made, not merely to vindicate his own character, but that he might thereon ground his accusation against them, for having cast off the government of God, through a proud unbelieving spirit. To fix a deeper conviction of guilt upon their minds, and to show that he was acting as the minister of Jehovah, he spake the word, and a most tremendous storm of thunder, uncommon at that season of the year, excited a general terror among them. They confessed their sin; they revered the Prophet, and entreated his charitable intercessions, that they might not perish in their iniquity. His purpose was an-

* 1 Sam. x. 1, &c.

† 1 Sam. xi. and xii.

swered ; and therefore he proceeded to encourage them by promises of God's unalterable support and protection, so long as they should cleave unto Him ; but he warned them also that their disobedience would bring down utter destruction both upon them and their king. As to himself, he assured them, that, though he was retiring from the management of their public affairs, he could not but have their interests at heart, and would never cease to offer up his prayers for them, or to instruct them in their duty. Thus was the highest deference secured to him : and, though he had resigned the supreme authority, he continued to act, with some degree of power, in his judicial capacity to the end of life.

The Lord, we perceive, will honour his faithful servants ; but, perhaps, not in the very way they would have contrived or wished. They should be content to leave to Him the justification of their integrity, even when they seem to be sinking into neglect and contempt. Let them be anxious only to fulfil their trust, whatever may be their acceptance with men. In the conduct of Samuel is exhibited a pattern of holy zeal, disinterestedness, and fidelity, which they should ever keep in view. It is well when we can boldly appeal to our despisers and persecutors, as to our sincerity, and they are constrained to bear witness in our favour. Yet we should beware, in speaking of ourselves, lest we be influenced by pride and resentment. For our motive should be, not that we may rise and triumph by the confusion of our enemies, but that God may be glorified, the cause of religion vindicated, good men confirmed in their principles, and

sinners converted unto righteousness. But, what ever be the event, though we be deprived of that rank we once possessed, and of those opportunities of extensive usefulness we once enjoyed, we should still endeavour to serve God and our fellow-creatures, according to the talents which are continued to us. No contemptuous or injurious treatment should provoke us to cease from our pious labours, so long and so far as we are permitted to exercise them.

Years before Christ, 1093. We have seen Samuel yielding up the civil power into the hands of Saul : but the Minister of religion will still appear, in the sequel of this history, superior to the Prince. He had previously enjoined the king to wait for his coming till a particular day, that he might offer sacrifices for him, and instruct him in his conduct, before he went forth to battle against the Philistines.* Samuel was not unmindful of his engagement : but it should seem that he purposely delayed his visit till the set time was nearly expired. By this delay, the pride, and impatience of Saul were discovered ; and then immediately the Prophet presented himself, in the name of the God of heaven, to reprove him for his disobedience, and to declare the fatal consequences of his transgression, in his approaching destruction.

Years before Christ, 1079. On another occasion we behold Samuel, with the same dignity, giving directions to the king, and passing judgment upon him.† He delivered the divine commission to him, for the utter extirpation of the Amalekites, and solemnly charged

* 1 Sam. x. 8, and xiii. 8, &c.

† 1 Sam. xv. 1, &c.

him to execute it punctually. But how great was his distress when he heard that Saul had again provoked the anger of the Lord by his hypocrisy, and that he had not fully performed the command! Deeply affected with the ungrateful rebellious spirit of the prince, and with the calamities coming upon him, he cried unto the Lord with most importunate intercessions for him. But the sentence against him was determined in the court of heaven; and the painful task of declaring it was committed to Samuel. The man of God, therefore, with all the majesty peculiar to his sacred character, "not fearing the wrath of the king," arraigned him as a criminal, convicted him of covetousness, pride, and dissimulation, very sharply reprov'd him for his disobedience, and pronounced his condemnation. He was then departing from him, with a holy indignation, but was detained awhile, in compliance with the earnest entreaties of Saul, that he might not shew him any open disrespect, or excite the contempt and opposition of the people against him.

With the same authority, as the servant of God commissioned for that very purpose, he proceeded to execute the sentence of death upon Agag, the king of the Amalekites, whom Saul had presumptuously spared.

This was the last visit which the Prophet paid to the rejected prince of Israel. Yet let it not be thought that he was influenced by resentment, arrogance, or cruelty. The very conduct, which a faithful discharge of his office required, was extremely afflictive to himself. Notwithstanding any appearances to the contrary,

he maintained, throughout, a most disinterested affection for Saul, and, after he had utterly withdrawn from him, continued to mourn for him in secret.

The ministers of religion may perceive in Samuel with what firmness, zeal, and courage, they should speak and act. Though in their private capacity they be meek and benevolent, and know how to make concessions, yet, when supporting their high and sacred character, as ambassadors of Heaven, they must "set their faces like a flint," and have no "respect of persons." They are not exempted from allegiance to government; but if they are called to address kings and princes, they should do it without fear or partiality, though with proper deference. On many occasions they are under the necessity of declaring the most offensive truths, which may subject them to the charge of pride, uncharitableness, and severity, at the very time that they suffer the utmost distress by the delivery of their message. They will not only labour in public, but weep and pray in secret, for the salvation of those whom they are supposed to condemn with bitterness. Yet, while they feel for the awful case of impenitent sinners, they should beware of countenancing their practices by any intimate connections, and should therefore withdraw from their society.

Years before Christ, 1063. The grief of Samuel, on Saul's account discovered an amiable and pious temper; but it seems to have been indulged to an extreme, and, perhaps, it disposed him to complain of the divine conduct. The Lord, therefore, rebuked him

charged him to acquiesce in the rejection of Saul, and sent him with an express commission to anoint one of the sons of Jesse, who was soon to be raised to the throne.* The Prophet would gladly have declined the task: he gave way to the suggestions of unbelief, and urged the danger to which his life would be exposed from the resentment of Saul: "How can I go? If Saul hear it, he will kill me." But his objections were overruled: he went in obedience to the command, and David was pointed out to him, by a secret revelation, as the person to be consecrated to the regal office. WE also should learn, not to indulge any excessive grief, even for the destruction of the wicked. It becometh us not to reply against God, but to rest assured that "His judgment is according to truth." Instead of complaining that justice is displayed in the punishment of sinners, let us rejoice and give thanks that any are "appointed to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ."

Samuel was now advanced in years, and retired from public business; and yet he was actively employed in promoting the great interests of religion. He is supposed to have founded those seminaries of pious education, "the schools of the prophets," which tended to preserve the purity of revelation, and to provide proper persons for the service of the church. The institution, evidently, promised the most extensive advantages, and, through the divine blessing, it continued to prosper for many generations. In these schools, probably, the man of God spent the close of

* 1 Sam. xvi. 1, &c.

his life : for when David fled from the persecution of Saul, he took refuge with Samuel, who, it is remarked, was "standing as appointed over the company of the prophets."* Thither the murderous rage of Saul pursued the trembling son of Jesse, and seemed likely to have destroyed both him and the aged Prophet together. But they were miraculously preserved : for the Spirit of God came upon the furious king, as well as upon all his messengers ; and he was confounded in his purpose.

Thus we should labour to the very last, and be zealous for the cause of God, whoever may decline. Dangers perhaps may threaten us ; but let us attend to our proper work, and the Lord will defend us. "He knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished."† By various methods He defeats the designs of his enemies, and, not uncommonly, by an immediate impression upon their minds, which constrains them, unaccountably to themselves, to abandon their schemes.

Years before After a life of eminent usefulness Samuel
Christ, 1060. departed in peace, and his death was much lamented by the whole nation of Israel.‡ How honourable does the good man appear, even in a private station ! Though he may be neglected by many, who once professed to revere him, his worth will be acknowledged when he is taken away, and his loss will be felt by the church. But while we contemplate those excellent personages, who are now removed

* 1 Sam. xix. 18, &c. † 2 Pet. ii. 9. ‡ 1 Sam. xxv. 1.

from the earth, we rejoice that "the residue of the Spirit" is with God. May He raise up, among ourselves, faithful witnesses for his name, endued with the same wisdom, diligence, and ardour in religion, which his prophets and messengers of old possessed! By their ministry may He "revive his work," establish his own kingdom in righteousness, and "make our Jerusalem a praise in the earth!" Amen.

S A U L.

CHAP. III. SECT. I.

Saul, an instance of dissimulation—his extraction and appearance—conducted to Samuel—anoointed—received another heart—prophesied—modest and forbearing—conquered the Ammonites—sacrificed contrary to Samuel's directions—reproved and condemned—not humbled—preserved a shew of piety—his rash imprecations—successful in his wars—destroyed the Amalekites, but spared Agag—convicted by Samuel—rejected—impenitent.

IN this practical review of Scripture Characters, while men of different descriptions pass before us, it will be useful to remark the difference of the divine conduct towards them. Indeed, the government of God is so extensive and mysterious, that we presume not to understand or discover all the reasons of his various proceedings: but we shall perceive sufficient proof of his love of holiness, and abhorrence of iniquity. Throughout the whole of his administration we shall observe, that the upright in heart are his delight, and the objects of his care; but that the wicked, whatever disguise they may assume, are hateful in his sight, and that, sooner or later, they feel the effects of his indignation.

There have been those, indeed, who, in one period of their lives, were distinguished by singular favours, and in another were marked as examples of the divine vengeance. Yet even in these instances, where God utterly rejects them whom he once seemed to regard with kindness, there is no unrighteousness with Him; "a God of truth, and without iniquity, just and right is He." Neither is there any change in His purposes; for "He is of one mind;" though there be, in our views, a manifest alteration, and we may be ready to conclude, from the dispensations of his providence, that He has departed from his original design.

Such are the reflections which will be suggested to us, as we are considering the character of Saul. He was raised to peculiar eminence by the immediate appointment of God, and by the same appointment was cast down, so as at last to perish under signs of heaviest displeasure. From the first part of his history, we are induced to form a favourable judgment of him; for we perceive many things amiable in his temper, and laudable in his conduct. We wonder, then, what was the cause of his miscarriage, and whence it came that so hopeful a beginning should have so miserable a conclusion. But is it uncommon for those, who are destitute of sound principles and real integrity of heart to put on a fair appearance for a season, to practise many duties, and, without betraying any inconsistency, to maintain a zealous profession of religion? Is it at all strange, then, that these persons, when brought into circumstances of strong temptation, should suddenly

throw off the mask, and proclaim their own insincerity? Awful as the case is, there are not a few, who, to our apprehensions, begin in the Spirit, and end in the flesh. Such was Saul. Let his example be improved as a solemn warning to all to beware of dissimulation. Let us be afraid of self-deceit, and not be satisfied with good intentions, or a partial temporary obedience. Let us consider well the nature of that service into which we are called to enter, and, "having put our hands to the plough," let us not dare to look back, but "be faithful unto death," if we would receive the crown of life. This is a subject, which should excite "great searchings of heart," and very fervent prayer to God.—Thou only, O Lord, triest the reins. Help us to discern our real character; deliver us from all formality and hypocrisy; shew us whereinsoever we are deceived; make us entirely conformable to thy will; and preserve us to thy heavenly kingdom.

The Israelites had desired a change of government, and the Lord had promised that their wishes should be gratified. For that purpose the regal office was instituted, and Saul nominated to it. The appointment, doubtless, was most honourable, but no evidence of any true excellency in him. The prince was intended to rescue the people from their enemies, but, at the same time, to be a scourge to them for their perverseness. For thus said the Lord, concerning this event, "I gave thee a king in mine anger."*

* Hos. xiii. 11.

Saul was descended from a Benjamite of considerable property: he was the son of Kish, “a mighty man of power,” and by his engaging and majestic appearance seemed likely to conciliate esteem, and command respect with a nation fond of pomp and grandeur.* For “he was a choice young man and a goodly: and there was not among the children of Israel a goodlier person than he.” But he owed not his exaltation to any influence which he derived from his family, or the gracefulness of his figure. The power was committed to him by the divine direction; and the Israelites were instructed to receive him, as chosen of God to rule over them.

Years before Christ, 1095. By a strange providence, whilst he sought for the asses which his father had lost, he was conducted to Samuel, who had been previously commanded, by a private revelation, to anoint him to the high function. The Prophet, therefore addressed him with the utmost respect, and intimated his approaching advancement: “On whom,” said Samuel, “is all the desire of Israel? Is it not on thee, and on all thy father’s house?” Flattering as this salutation was, it seemed not to raise any aspiring thoughts in him. He replied, with a becoming modesty, “Am not I a Benjamite, of the smallest of the tribes of Israel? and my family the least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? wherefore then speakest thou so to me?”

In the course of the interview, he was treated with a peculiar deference, and instructed in the duties of

* 1 Sam. ix. 1, &c.

his future office by the wise and pious conversation of Samuel. Upon his dismissal, he received from the Prophet the consecrating oil, and an assurance that he was appointed to be "Captain over the Lord's inheritance."* The declaration was so astonishing, that, probably, it staggered his belief: and therefore, to convince him that this whole matter was ordered of God, and that He would afford him protection, various signs were given him, which were all accomplished on that very day.

"When he had turned his back to go from Samuel, God gave him another heart." A wonderful change was produced in his views, abilities, and inclinations: but it is doubted how far this change extended. Some have supposed that, by the sanctifying influence of divine grace, he was renewed in righteousness, and became a holy person, But this is much more than is implied in the expression, or can be inferred from any part of the history. It is not said that he received "a new," but "another heart:" not that he was made holy, but "turned into another man." The Lord, who had called him to so distinguished an office, immediately qualified him for it, and, by an extraordinary power, inspired him with sentiments and dispositions suitable to a king. His mind, then, no longer intent upon the objects of his former occupation, aimed at greater things, and thought only of the momentous concerns of government. He was designed to be a brave general, and a wise prince;

* 1 Sam. x. 1; &c.

for which purpose he was endued from above with understanding, courage, vigour, and activity.

Those, whom the Lord appoints to any service, will receive, in due time, an adequate measure of preparation for it. He, who possesses all fulness in himself, is pleased to furnish them, whom He employs as his instruments, with all needful talents and abilities. But a qualification for the most extensive usefulness does not imply any real excellency of moral character. Many, like Saul, may be suddenly changed, and yet not converted to God; may be fitted for some important post in life, and yet not made the children of God, and the heirs of his kingdom. We must, therefore, carefully distinguish between the most eminent gifts and the least degree of sanctifying grace. There are those who may be enabled to fill a high department, either in the church or state, with considerable advantage to society, who may nevertheless continue totally destitute of true religion.

Saul was met on the road by a company of prophets, "and the Spirit of God came upon him, and he prophesied among them." This circumstance occasioned great astonishment; and probably it was designed to convince the people that he was called to the government; but it did not prove that he possessed any holy dispositions toward God. Many, at the last awful day, will plead their gifts, their usefulness, and their reputation in the church: "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?" To whom the Judge will say, "I never knew

you : depart from me, ye that work iniquity.”* And do not some modern professors of the Gospel rest in common attainments, which, though we attribute them to God and the operation of his Spirit, are often bestowed on carnal persons, and are, therefore, no mark of the divine approbation ? To describe, and estimate with exactness, the different systems of faith ; to dispute with zeal for right doctrines ; to talk, and pray, and preach, with fluency of speech, and to the admiration of the hearers ;—these are considered as most valuable acquisitions, and, on these, we fear, some place their dependence. Yet, with such qualifications, they may be proud, and covetous, and contentious, and revengeful, and at last go down to eternal destruction.

But, though Saul was thus distinguished, he did not at that time betray any signs of vanity or ambition. He was not forward to proclaim his approaching advancement, but with great modesty concealed the matter even from his friends ; nor did he take one step to seat himself on the throne. Nay, when the people were solemnly convened by Samuel, for the purpose of receiving their king according to the Lord’s appointment, and of investing him with his high office, it should seem that Saul, from a sense of his own insufficiency, would gladly have declined the honour ; for he had secreted himself from their notice. And, after his inauguration, he was backward to assume any regal pomp ; he retired, as usual, to his own house. A retinue, indeed, accompanied him, for the support of his authority ; but he did not provide it for himself : it was

* Matt. vii. 22, 23.

“ a band of men, whose hearts God had touched.” By many others he was treated with insolent contempt, which might have excited the warmest resentment, especially when he was armed with power : but, with singular meekness and discretion, he passed by the offence, and, “ held his peace.”

This is a pleasing part of his character, and may be proposed for general imitation. The history describes him as an obedient son, attentive to the commands of his father, and concerned lest his long absence should distress him. His surprise at the first hint of his elevation, his diffidence and humility when the honour was tendered to him, his modesty and forbearance upon his advancement, have conciliated our esteem, and raised our expectations. We should rejoice to see the same prudent reserve, the same gentleness of spirit, particularly in young men of eminent attainments. Alas ! what conceit and arrogance, what a vehement and vindictive temper, do we discover even in some, who pride themselves upon their morality ! We refer them to Saul for a reproof. In others, indeed, who are evidently destitute of religion, we perceive a condescension and readiness to forgive, which proceed not from holy principles, and yet render them agreeable and useful members of society. We respect and value them in their place, but lament, that, while they go so far, they should go no farther. What will avail their amiable qualities in the sight of men, without piety towards God ?

Saul still continued in a private situation, meekly waiting the event ; and, though appointed to a king-

dom, disdained not to follow his former occupation till the Lord was pleased to call him forth to public notice. During his attendance on his cattle, he heard that the inhabitants of Jabesh were threatened by the Ammonites ; and immediately, through the powerful influence of the divine Spirit upon his mind, being fired with indignation, he stirred up the people to oppose their insulting enemies.* His dispatch, and prudence and courage, were most astonishing. In a very short space, he assembled a numerous army ; he marched, fought, and conquered. This singular victory induced the nation to receive him as their governor, and from that time he was fully established in the throne. We are struck with his clemency in the hour of his triumph. For, when it was proposed that those who had been ill-affected towards him should be destroyed for their insolence, he declared his determination to pardon them ; and, with an appearance of gratitude and devotion, ascribed the deliverance to God.

From what motive this conduct proceeded, we presume not to assert. But surely the same patience in waiting the disposals of Providence, the same forbearance towards scoffers and calumniators, are equally incumbent upon all. We know who hath said, " Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves."† But where are those, who, with power in their hands, can put up with indignities and injuries from an inferior ? How many, professing to be followers of Jesus, stand

* 1 Sam. xi. 5, &c.

† Rom. xii. 19.

reproved for their impetuosity, their bitterness, and desire of revenge !

So far the history has represented Saul in an amiable light: but a melancholy change succeeds. Nor is the case singular. Who does not shed a tear over the multitudes that have appeared to run well in the Christian race, and yet, through some hinderance or other, have at last "drawn back unto perdition?" Grandeur and prosperity, we apprehend, were fatal to Saul, and have been so to thousands. After two years, we no longer behold him the same bold and generous commander as before; at least, in many instances, he will appear cowardly, mean, and hypocritical. He had experienced the divine protection and support in an eminent degree; but we shall soon perceive him the scorn of his enemies, a terror to himself, and a burden to all around him. This will furnish an instructive lesson. "The Lord is with you, while ye be with Him; and if ye seek Him, He will be found of you; but if ye forsake him, He will forsake you."*

Years before Christ, 1093. Perhaps through a love of ease and splendour, upon coming to the full possession of the regal dignity, he neglected for two years to shake off the oppressive tyranny of the Philistines, who therefore improved the opportunity and gathered strength, while his own subjects were dissatisfied with his conduct.† At length the alarm of war was given: the Philistines took the field against him; and he was reduced to a great strait. The Israelites were terrified by the threats of the enemy, and, having no confidence

* 2 Chron. xv. 2.

† 1 Sam. xiii. 1, &c.

in their king, deserted him in large numbers. His obedience was then put to the test, and he failed in the hour of trial. He had been charged, doubtless by the direction of God himself, to wait seven days, till Samuel should arrive to furnish him with instructions, and to preside in the offices of religion : but through impatience and unbelief, contrary to the injunction, he presumed to offer sacrifices without him. Immediately, and within the appointed time, the messenger of the Lord appeared, and called the prince to account for what he had done.

Saul, we have seen, had transgressed a plain command ; but he attempted, by paltry excuses, to justify his conduct, and even boasted of his attention to the divine service. He pleaded that he had waited, according to the order given him ; that his people were deserting him, and the Philistines ready to attack him ; and therefore, that as he dared not to engage in the war without first imploring the protection of God, he had himself performed the proper acts of devotion, in violence to his own wishes, and of unavoidable necessity. This was specious ; but it was hypocritical. Samuel detected his insincerity, and, not allowing any of his pleas, condemned his disobedience, and declared the Lord's determination to deprive him of that power which he had abused.

Saul laid great stress, as formalists and dissemblers generally do, on the external rites of religion, which he would not neglect ; but he attended not to the divine precept any further than suited his own inclination or convenience. Perhaps he was proud of his authority,

and not brooking any submission to the Prophet, desired to convince the people that his assistance was not wanted : he therefore, insolently and profanely, encroached on the priest's office : and it will be recollected, that, for a similar offence, King Uzziah was smitten with leprosy.* Yet many considerations might seem to palliate his guilt, if not to vindicate his conduct. It might be argued that he was compelled by the difficulties of his situation ; that the action, at least, was good ; and that the presence of Samuel could be but of little consequence.—Alas ! how prone men are to make light of sin ! how ready to frame excuses in their own defence when they transgress ! This or the other crime, it is alleged, is but a trifle ; and, as they are driven to great straits, a peculiar licence may be allowed them.

Sinners, you deceive yourselves. Nothing can justify a plain neglect of duty, in the most minute instance. Beware of “contemning small things,” lest you “fall by little and little.” To call that a trifle, which is a breach of an express command, is to set aside or depreciate the authority of God. You might account the offence of your first parents as of no vast magnitude ; but, by the just judgment of God, it has “brought death into the world, and all our wo.” The Lord only knows the secret springs of action ; and, in His sight, that conduct may be base and detestable, as the sacrifice of Saul was, which before men may seem proper and laudable. You may be involved in dangers and distresses like Saul : but, in those very circum-

* 2 Chron. xxvi. 19.

stances, you are required to evince your faith and obedience. If you are not willing to trust and submit to God in the utmost perplexities, we may fear you have no real regard to him at all.

It had been declared that the government of Saul should not continue, on account of his contemptuous violation of the divine command. He was still kept upon his trial; but no favourable change appeared. Nay, the very awful denunciation of the Prophet produced not any good effect. We perceive no marks of humiliation; we hear not one petition to God for the pardon of his offence. And, when the judgments and "terrors of the Lord" make little or no impression upon sinners, we have cause to apprehend that their case is hopeless indeed.

The king of Israel, probably, being displeased with Samuel's faithful reproof, wished for no more communications with him. Yet he did not therefore cast off the profession of religion. He procured the high-priest from Shiloh to attend him in the camp, and perhaps was satisfied with the presence and the services of a minister who would not be so troublesome to him as Samuel had been.* But, whilst he should have been leading his forces against the Philistines, he was weak, foolish, and dejected. With a small company of six hundred men, who were also dispirited, he seemed to retire from them, at least not to possess courage enough to attack them.

The prospect was dark; for what could be expected in favour of Israel, when God had been provoked by

* 1 Sam. xiv. 2, &c.

their king, at the very entrance upon this expedition? Yet He graciously interposed for the deliverance of his people, whilst he shewed the strongest disapprobation of Saul. Jonathan, the young prince, and his armour-bearer, with a holy ardour, and confidence in God, which astonish us, rushed into the camp of the Philistines, and, through their means, that mighty army was put to flight and vanquished.

Saul, indeed, upon the noise of the battle, with great impatience pursued the enemy; but it should seem that his rash and impolitic behaviour, in restraining his men from food, rather interrupted than assisted the slaughter. With a semblance of devotion, he stopped to offer sacrifice; and on that occasion it is remarked, that "he built his first altar unto the Lord." Can any thing more clearly prove his hypocrisy? In his best days he had neglected the divine service, and never discovered any true zeal for the support of religion. But now in a state of apostacy from God, to salve his conscience, and to preserve appearances, he procures the attendance of a minister, and, for the first time, erects a place for public worship. There is, then, a show of piety, and an external regard to ordinances, which persons of the worst principles and dispositions may maintain. But these are unavailing and detestable in the sight of God.

Saul was eager to proceed in the pursuit of the Philistines, but, upon the proposal of the high-priest, he waited to consult the Lord. No answer was given; whence the conclusion was evident, that the displeasure of Heaven has been incurred. Who, then, was the

offender? Through the rash and profane imprecation of Saul, Jonathan was unwarily brought into condemnation for having tasted a little food in the fatigues of the battle: and immediately the cruel father, most severe in his animadversions upon his pious son, and not humbling himself for his own misconduct, which was the real cause of the distress, prepared to take vengeance on him. But the amiable youth was rescued by the interposition of the people in his favour; and thus the reproof fell upon the head of the king. After this incident, which seems to have excited disgust in the mind of Saul, he retired from the pursuit of the enemy, and neglected to improve the victory. What do we observe, in the whole of his behaviour on this occasion, but an impetuous, proud, malignant, and impious disposition? And do we not, in every instance, perceive, that man, left to himself, betrays the sad depravity of his nature, and is enslaved to the basest tempers?

Notwithstanding the threatenings which had been denounced against Saul, the Lord was pleased to make use of him as an instrument of protecting his people, and of chastising their oppressors. He obtained various successes in war; and in the mean time a further probation was allowed him. But, perhaps, his very prosperity proved a snare to him, and prevented him from attending to his guilt and danger. The Lord is long-suffering toward sinners, who are the declared objects of his wrath; and, while he is pouring down temporal comforts upon them, he gives them full opportunity of manifesting their real characters. But

their continued impenitence will at length bring on them complete and final destruction.

Years before Christ, about 1079. The following transaction exhibits the Jewish prince in his true colours ; and it was designed to draw forth and evince the hypocrisy of his heart. His disobedience was again put to the test by the express direction of God ; and he was found to be unfaithful and rebellious. The prophet Samuel, who had, probably, been avoided on account of his former reproofs, was sent to the king, requiring him, in the name of Jehovah, from whom he had received his power, and as ever he wished to testify his regard to the divine authority, to go and utterly destroy the Amalekites.* It was alleged, that this sinful nation, particularly for their injurious treatment of the Israelites, was doomed, by the righteous judgment of Heaven, to entire desolation. He was, therefore, charged to pay no respect to age or sex, and to kill both man and beast. Without hesitation, and with great ardour, he proceeded to execute the commission. A numerous army was summoned, with which he attacked and conquered the Amalekites. But his insincerity was manifested, in “doing the work of the Lord deceitfully.” For, through some base principles, probably through covetousness or ambition, he spared Agag, the king of the Amalekites, and destroyed only so much of the spoil as was worthless, reserving all that was valuable for his own emolument. This is a frequent case. Many will serve God with alacrity and zeal, so long as they are thereby promoting their own temporal

* 1 Sam. xv. 1, &c.

interest ; but when their duty militates against their selfish schemes, they discover their unsoundness, and will rather renounce their allegiance to God than forego their present advantage. But will He accept a partial obedience ? Will He not reject with disdain such hypocrites as profess to honour him, and yet tender him only the service which is convenient or profitable to themselves ? “ Be not deceived : God is not mocked.”

The divine indignation was kindled against Saul ; and the same Prophet who had given him the commission was sent to reprove him for its unfaithful execution. The haughty monarch, indeed, proud of his successes, had erected a trophy of his own glory ; and, as if he were not conscious of any crime, he went up to Samuel with an appearance of devout respect and of great confidence, and began to boast that he had done his duty. But he was immediately convicted on the plainest evidence : the bleating of the sheep and the lowing of the oxen, which had been spared, were sufficient proofs against him. It is always a suspicious sign when men are forward to proclaim their own obedience ; for, in general, those are most ready to tell of their doings who are most defective. If we are conceited of our goodness, let us examine, Is there nothing in our tempers or conduct which gives the lie to our profession ? May we not be detected, as Saul was, by some manifest inconsistencies ?

The dissimulating prince was unwilling to yield to the reproof, which was another unfavourable symp-

tom. He endeavoured to cast the blame from himself upon the people, alleging that they had been the cause of preserving the choicest of the spoil ; and that, if the action were in some degree wrong, the motive at least was excellent, as they meant to devote the prey to religious purposes. This was a poor subterfuge indeed ; for, had the people been disposed to violate their duty, it was his part to direct and restrain them ; and to give up his authority to them was no other than treachery to God. It should seem, also, that his plea of a good intention was both frivolous and false : frivolous, because a pious design will never justify what is really criminal in itself ; and false, because covetousness, not devotion, was the leading principle in the transgression. Samuel, therefore, would not allow the excuse, but condemned his conduct, as evincing a sad change, proceeding from a haughty and rapacious spirit, and implying an avowed contempt of God. Still the king continued to vindicate himself on the very same ground, and maintained his own integrity. Ah ! how difficult it is to bring sinners to an acknowledgment of their offences ! But surely it is a mark of a proud and unhumiliated heart, to cast about for apologies, and to fly from one evasion to another, in defence of that which is evil.

At length however, Saul put on the semblance of a penitent. When he perceived the Prophet's firmness in reproving him, and had heard the solemn declaration, that he must be driven from his kingdom, he made a confession of his sin ; yet in such a way as to discover his hypocrisy. He cried out, indeed, " I have sinned,"

but was still desirous to find some extenuation of his crime ; and therefore he alleged that he had done it only through a timid compliance with the people. This was not probable ; for in other respects, when his own honour was concerned, he was tenacious enough of his authority ; or, if true, it was no vindication, because he should have scrupulously followed the divine direction, against all opposition. The real convert, we apprehend, will unreservedly take shame to himself ; and, though others may be partners in his guilt, he will be more likely to account himself chief in the transgression, than to cast the blame upon them ; whilst the dissembler will catch at every appearance of an excuse, to palliate his offence.

It is evident also, from the very confessions of Saul, that he was not convinced of the heinousness of his sin. He dreaded the consequences of Samuel's displeasure ; and to him, therefore, he made his application for pardon, being most solicitous to regain his favour. Ah ! what will it avail us to obtain forgiveness from our fellow-creatures ? Let us seriously consider of how great magnitude is our wickedness in the sight of a holy God ! A proper sense of this will swallow up every other thought, and constrain us to cry out with David, " Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned."*

The Prophet was departing from him in disgust, and with heavy denunciations ; when the king, neither humbling himself before God, nor willing to be disgraced before his subjects, laid hold on him, and ear-

* Psal. li. 4.

nestly entreated him to stay with him awhile, and pay him some public respect. "I have sinned," said he; "yet honour me now, I pray thee, before the elders of my people, and before Israel, and turn again with me, that I may worship the Lord thy God." This was very gross indeed; it shewed that he chiefly desired to preserve appearances with men, and was most of all distressed because his reputation would suffer, and perhaps a defection take place in his kingdom. Was this any mark of true repentance, or even consistent with it? Yet how many are there of a like description, who flatter themselves that they are converted to God, whilst their main concern is to obtain some tokens of favour from pious ministers, or other excellent persons, in order that they may be thought well of in the world? This, at least, is the language of their hearts, "Honour me now," as if the good opinion of men would satisfy them. But, where there is such a solicitude to maintain a character, we apprehend that the odiousness of sin is not rightly understood, and that there is no real humiliation on account of it.

Saul indeed, immediately afterwards, and in the presence of Samuel, "worshipped the Lord;" but, it should seem, this was done merely in pretence, and to keep his credit. In the very same manner the external rites and duties of religion are scrupulously observed and constantly practised by some who dislike the whole business. Let us beware lest our devotion be of this sort: for it is most base to worship the Lord, through a regard to our own reputation,

What wonder was it, then, that the Lord rejected him, whose best service was an act of vile dissimulation? We read not that he was ever humbled for his offence. Though he was spared for a long time after this transaction, the goodness of God did not lead him to repentance; for he continued, to the last, proud, and cruel, and profane. "And the Lord repented that he had made Saul king over Israel." There was not, there could not, be any alteration in the counsels of God, or in the system of His government. He foresaw what Saul would be, and knew that by his disobedience and hypocrisy he would bring down the heaviest judgments upon himself and his people. But from this period of the history, as Saul's insincerity was now manifested, the divine conduct towards him was evidently changed: so that, speaking after the manner of men, it seemed as if God repented of the favours bestowed upon him.

The case is most awful; but it may be improved to useful purposes.

1. Let all examine their own state and character. If we profess to serve the Lord, let us be afraid of coming short of real religion; for we have seen that a partial obedience will not suffice. Let us inquire, then, Do we desire to do the WHOLE will of God? Is there no convenient sin, no favourite lust, that we spare? Are we truly humbled for our guilt, and willing to take shame to ourselves before God and man, without seeking, or resting on, any frivolous excuses?

2. Let the sincere penitent be comforted. Many, whose hearts are upright with God, are so oppressed

with a sense of their iniquities, especially of such as have been committed after hopeful appearances and professions of piety, that they fear the history of Saul is a picture of themselves. A conclusion this, most painful indeed ! But to you, who hate every evil way, we can administer consolation. The very distress you feel is a favourable sign ; a proof that you are not rejected of God ; for to Him you must ascribe your abhorrence of sin, and your earnest desire to be renewed in holiness. Saul's case, then, is not your's. You have those dispositions of mind which are an evidence of grace, and which he had not. O give thanks ; and " hold fast that which you have received."

3. Let hypocrites be alarmed, and persuaded to turn unto God, not in form and appearance only, but with unfeigned sincerity. For what will avail their boasted duties, and all their specious pretences to devotion ? The Lord, who searches the heart, detests their loud professions of love to Him, and will soon expose the baseness of their characters. O think, then, How shall you stand in the judgment before Him ! Be solicitous not merely to avoid disgrace in this world, but to escape that shame and everlasting contempt, which will be the portion of deceivers.

S A U L.

SECT. II.

Saul, troubled by an evil spirit—preferred David—incensed at his popularity—afraid of him—married his daughter to him—frustrated in frequent attempts to kill him—continued to persecute him, though twice, being spared by David, he relented—terrified by the Philistines, consulted a witch—confounded by Samuel's appearance—overcome in battle—destroyed himself.

WHATEVER sanguine hopes we had entertained, upon our first view of the character of Saul, if we advert to the circumstances which we last considered, we shall expect nothing from the sequel of his history to yield us any pleasure. We left him in a most awful situation ; though a king upon his throne, an object of commiseration rather than of envy. He had transgressed the command, and incurred the wrath, of God ; yet he was not humbled for his sin, nor did he seek reconciliation. Samuel, the Prophet of the Lord, his faithful friend and counsellor, had forsaken him, to return no more ; after pronouncing the solemn denunciation against him, that his kingdom would soon be taken from him, and given to another. Shall we wonder, then, to hear, that “ the Spirit of the Lord

departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord troubled him?"*

The declaration, indeed, may excite an alarm. It may be said, "Will the Lord finally abandon those with whom he has been pleased to fix his abode?" where is our boasted security in the covenant of grace, if they, who are partakers of the divine favour, may at last be cast off, and delivered up to Satan? But the case before us will not warrant such a conclusion, which would be as dishonourable to God as distressing to his people. He promises, "I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them, to do them good: but I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me."†

With Saul, "the latter end was worse than the beginning:" but through his whole life he had never been brought under the influence of true religion. The Spirit of God, we have observed, was bestowed upon him, not to sanctify his heart, but to qualify him for the office of a king, to make him a wise governor, an active, prudent, and valiant commander. Thus also the Spirit of the Lord came upon those who were called "the Judges," to endue them with suitable abilities for their particular department, and to inspire them with courage and zeal for the defence or deliverance of the Israelites. This Spirit departed from Saul; so that he no longer possessed the same distinguished talents, as a statesman or a general, but lost his former discernment, fortitude, and vigour.—We are

* 1 Sam. xvi. 14.

† Jer. xxxii. 40.

continually dependent upon the God of heaven for the exertion of every faculty. If he withdraw his assistance, we are instantly unfitted for the duties of life.

“ And an evil spirit from the Lord troubled him.” The Lord, in righteous judgment deserting him, suffered him to be exposed to the snares and carried away by the influence of a wicked spirit. Alas! when God quits his residence in the human heart, all good is removed, and the door is opened for the admission of every evil. If left to ourselves, we should immediately proceed from one iniquity to another. A foreign enemy, likewise, is ready to take the advantage, even “ the adversary,” whose employment it is to “ deceive the nations,” and who “ walketh about seeking whom he may devour.” We do not wonder, then, that, when the Spirit of the Lord departs, an evil spirit enters in. But the devil is under control, nor can he exercise any power, or suggest any temptation, further than the Lord permits. We are accordingly taught to ascribe to the divine permission the ascendancy of Satan over Saul.*

This by no means implies that God is the author of any moral evil; but, in order to manifest his abhorrence of sin, He is pleased to withhold the benefits of his protection from perverse and obstinate offenders, and, for their contempt of his word and commandment, to remove from them that influence whereby they had been restrained and assisted. Shall we complain that “ His spirit will not always strive with

See also 1 Kings xxii. 22. Job. ii. 6

man?" Is it not a righteous thing in Him to withdraw his presence, after repeated insults and provocations?

Let us attend, then, to the sequel of Saul's history, which exhibits a dismal picture indeed. We shall find him, from this period even to the close of his life, dejected, timorous, given up to all vile affections, envy, deceit, hatred, malice, cruelty, and murder.

He was seized, it should seem, with a deep melancholy, which oppressed him, at least by intervals, and from which he sought relief by the help of music. The harp and the company of David, who was sent for to court on this occasion, alleviated the king's distress for a short season. While David "took his harp, and played with his hand, Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him." We read not that he ever applied unto God for peace, or desired His return. And, alas! how many, under the severest wretchedness of mind, do in like manner "restrain prayer!" They are unwilling to attend to any religious convictions, and therefore, by various contrivances, endeavour to stifle the reproaches of conscience. For a while, perhaps, the giddy pleasures of the world may dispel their gloom, and divert their thoughts. But real and lasting comfort cannot possibly be obtained by men who keep at a distance from God, or refuse to come, as the Gospel prescribes, to "the blood of sprinkling."

Years before
Christ, about
1063.

The unhappy prince, forsaken of his defence, trembled at the approach of his enemies. He had collected a numerous army to oppose

his insulting neighbours ; but, when Goliath appeared with his proud and impious challenge, Saul was dismayed, and the people also, probably through their leader's timidity, were disheartened.*—Even a natural strength of mind is the gift of God : and the surest method to possess a firm and unshaken fortitude is to seek reconciliation with Him, and a sense of his favour. What have they to fear, who can sing, “ The Lord of hosts is with us ; the God of Jacob is our refuge ? ”

Deliverance, indeed, was wrought for Israel, but with no credit to their king. David went forth with more than human courage, and, by the help of his God, slew the contemptuous foe. The victory, which was signal and important, paved the way for David's advancement. Saul, being for a time much attached to him, appointed him to a place of honour. But soon afterward his warmest resentment was excited by the public acclamations of the people in praise of David. For, while they sang “ Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands,” he was jealous of the young man's superior glory, and began to apprehend the loss of his kingdom. “ He eyed David from that day and forward.” † How terrible are the effects of envy ! Its eyes are ever wandering abroad, to seek causes of distress to itself, in the excellence or happiness of others. Those, therefore, who are under its influence, are rendered extremely wretched by every pleasing object around them, and are generally hurried by it to the basest schemes of iniquity. O, let us be-

* 1 Sam. xvii. 1, &c.

† xviii. 6, &c.

ware, lest, by the indulgence of this passion, we “give place to the devil !” For no sooner is envy cherished in the heart, than a free admission is granted to the vilest affections.

To the gratification of this malignant disposition in Saul we ascribe the succeeding enormities of his conduct. The Lord in judgment permitted Satan to return, and to gain a still greater ascendancy over him : in consequence of which, the king commenced a furious persecutor, and entertained designs of murder. Twice together his intentions of killing David were frustrated. Yet he repented not : but, perceiving the awful change which had taken place in himself, and the divine blessing upon David, he was afraid of the harmless youth, and could not bear him in his sight. There is something in the presence of an eminently good man, which will often strike a terror into those of an opposite character. They, who hate the company of truly religious persons, are secretly afraid of them, because they know that the Lord is with them, and that they themselves possess not the same exalted privileges. You then, who fear God, should learn to maintain a holy confidence and courage : for “greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world.”* Your very enemies, in the midst of all their malevolent machinations against you, are constrained to stand in awe of you.

Men of bad designs are generally reduced to the meanest as well as basest artifices, for the accomplishment of their purposes ; and yet, notwithstanding all

* 1 John iv. 4.

their cunning and malice, they are often wonderfully disconcerted and baffled in their schemes. Saul, who pretended a favour to David, was seeking his destruction. To remove him out of his sight, he preferred him to a higher post in the army. But this disturbed him the more, as it increased the popularity of David. The envious prince, therefore, proposed to give his eldest daughter in marriage to the very person whom he suspected and dreaded as a rival. The offer proceeded not from friendship, but extreme malignity; for a condition was imposed that David should undertake an expedition against the Philistines; and a hope was entertained that he would fall by the enemy's hand. The king was disappointed, and then he departed from his promise: but another and a similar project was tried, from the same malicious principles. Though the eldest daughter was withheld, her younger sister was engaged and actually married to David; for which it was required only that he should once more attack the Philistines, and slay a hundred of them. It was expected that the attempt would prove fatal to him; but here again the plans of the treacherous prince were defeated, and his confusion and hatred increased. "He was the more afraid of David, and became his enemy continually." He avowed the malignity of his heart, and charged both his son Jonathan and all his servants to kill David.*

Yet, though the king of Israel's disposition was most detestable, there were intervals, in which we might have conceived some favourable hopes of him,

* 1 Sam. xix. 1, &c.

Upon his son's remonstrance, his resentment seemed to subside, and he solemnly swore that David should not die. Accordingly, a reconciliation took place, and David was admitted into his presence, as in times past. But it is not enough that good resolutions are formed, or even adhered to for a short season. There are few persons, however confirmed in wickedness, who do not sometimes relent, and who are not constrained, on some occasions or other, to make the strongest protestations of amendment, and really perhaps for a while, to reform their conduct.

The sequel will prove that Saul's inward disposition remained the same. His cruelty and rage very soon broke forth again, on account of David's repeated victories; and he attempted to murder him, instead of honouring and rewarding him for his faithful services. The javelin was cast, but it missed its aim. He was prevented also, by his own daughter's artifice, from assassinating David in private; and when, with the same bloody designs, he sent three different companies to apprehend him, and at last himself pursued him even to Ramah, he was baffled in his purpose by a miraculous interposition. The Spirit of God came upon Him, as well as upon his messengers, and constrained them all, in a supernatural ecstasy, to prophecy, and to depart without the power of doing any harm. The most violent persecutors, we observe, are at the Lord's disposal, who can repress their fury, and defeat their schemes, when and how He pleases.

When the restraint was taken off, the pride and cruelty of Saul appeared with as much strength as be-

fore. He discovered, or suspected, that Jonathan was in David's interest, and thereby was provoked with the grossest reproaches to vilify the character, and with his own hand to strike at the life, of his amiable and pious son.* In the same outrageous spirit, he complained that all his attendants were in league against him to dethrone him, and commanded that eighty-five priests should be slain, and their city utterly desolated, for shewing kindness to David.† The king was pursuing the object of his resentment to Keilah, but was again disappointed.‡ Yet he continued daily to seek his destruction, which was prevented only by the gracious interpositions of God. On one occasion particularly, when, after some fruitless attempts, Saul seemed on the very point of obtaining his wishes, and had almost surrounded David and his company, he was instantly called off by a sudden invasion of the Philistines, and obliged to give up his prey. Alas ! how restless are sinners, who are enslaved to the vile affections of envy, jealousy, and malice ! How unwilling to renounce their base projects, though repeatedly baffled ! And yet they are not only enemies to all around them, and can have no confidence in any, but they are, and must be, inconceivably wretched in themselves.

There was nothing in David's conduct to justify this injurious treatment. He discovered the utmost submission, fidelity, and attachment to his prince ; on which account the hatred and violence he met with were the more detestable. Even Saul himself was

* 1 Sam. xx. 30, &c. † xxii. 6, &c. ‡ xxiii. 7, &c.

forced to confess it. No sooner was he delivered from the Philistines, than he returned to his former pursuit "like as a lion that is greedy of his prey." With a numerous and well-chosen army, he followed the son of Jesse :* and by a very singular providence, while he retired into a cave for sleep, he fell into the hands of the man whose life he was seeking. David, however, with an astonishing lenity and forbearance, spared and protected him, and meekly expostulated with him on the injustice and sinfulness of his persecution. Saul being instantly convicted, and melted down, with tears acknowledged his own iniquity. He testified also the integrity of David, professed to pray that God would reward him for his kindness ; and, in the firm expectation of his being raised to the throne, entreated him not to cut off his seed, or destroy his name. This might seem, at first view, the sentiment of penitence ; but, alas ! the impression was momentary, produced perhaps by a sudden alarm of conscience, without any humiliation before God, or any desire to be reconciled to Him. Many of most profligate characters, are at times constrained to allow and lament their folly, and to express their esteem for those excellent persons whom they have hated and opposed, and whom they still continue to persecute.

The king of Israel had shown hopeful appearances, and had really desisted from his murderous pursuit of David. But the same malignant temper remained within, though it had been restrained for a season ; and, upon the first temptation, it broke forth

* 1 Sam. xxiv. 1, &c.

with its former violence. The Ziphites proposed to assist him in the discovery of his enemy; and immediately his passions were roused, and his soldiers were called out to hunt after the life of David, as before.* Some very proper feelings, indeed, seemed to be awakened in him, by the singular forbearance of that eminent saint, who, with full power in his hands, a second time refused to take revenge. The infatuated king again confessed and deplored his folly and his guilt, entreated David to return to him as his son, and vowed that he would no longer entertain any malevolent designs against him. He was constrained also to pronounce a blessing upon him, and to foretel his future advancement and prosperity, though he had intended to destroy him. At last, then, he ceased from his mad pursuit; but, notwithstanding such strong convictions of his sin, and professions of amendment, he cried not to God for mercy; nor will the sequel exhibit any signs of penitence in him.

Some such hopeful appearances may often be found in men who are obstinately enslaved to the most vicious affections. Like Saul, they may at times acknowledge, "I have played the fool, and have erred exceedingly," and yet continue in the same absurd and destructive courses. A sense of their guilt and danger may force itself upon them, and excite great horrors in their conscience, though they refuse to renounce their evil practices. Upon the admonition of a friend, under a serious sermon, or in the distress of some afflictive providence, they may perhaps tremble at

* 1 Sam. xxvi, 1, &c.

themselves, and seem to form the strongest purposes of amendment. But the very next temptation baffles their resolutions, and disconcerts all their plans of becoming religious. They return, "as a dog to his vomit," and, like Pharaoh, they harden their hearts still more. Ah! what avails such repentance as this? What is it but to insult God? No wonder that men in such a state are "given over" to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient," and "bring upon themselves swift destruction."

David, we are told, experienced no more of Saul's persecuting rage;* but we apprehend that he owed his security to his flight, and not to any change of disposition in the prince. Why else was he not admitted into favour at court? or, why should he still continue in dread of falling by the hand of violence? The very tremendous close of the wretched life we are considering will fully prove that he, who had "made so fair a show in the flesh," remained impenitent to the last.

Years before Christ, about 1056. Under the alarms of an evil conscience, Saul had lost his former activity and courage, and probably foreboded his own approaching ruin. Upon an invasion of the Philistines, he was utterly dismayed; and, though he prepared for war, the sight of his enemies filled him with confusion.† In this distress, indeed, he consulted the Lord, but received no answer. Shall we wonder at this? He had filled up the measure of his iniquity, and the time of judgment was come. We are therefore ad-

* 1 Sam. xxvii. 4.

† xxviii. 4, &c.

monished to "seek the Lord while he may be found, to call upon him while he is near." But, if sinners harden their hearts against all his gracious offers and invitations, is He bound by any promise in his word, or by any attribute of his nature, to listen to their cry, when nothing but their suffering, or the dread of impending destruction, drives them to Him; and when they are howling for deliverance from misery, not seeking reconciliation with Him? Had Saul inquired of the Lord before, in sincerity and with real humiliation, he would not have been brought into that trouble; at least he would not have been deserted in the hour of his distress. Or, had he even then turned to the Lord, with an entire renunciation of his sin, and as a true penitent implored forgiveness, the issue would have been favourable. But thus saith the Lord, "These men have set up their idols in their heart, and put the stumbling-block of their iniquity before their face: should I be inquired of at all by them?" "To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? When ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you; yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear; your hands are full of blood."*

O, how unspeakably blessed are they who have found the way of access to God by Jesus Christ, and can look up with confidence to Him, as engaged by his own covenant to order their affairs for them, to preserve and to save them! Their deepest afflictions cannot separate them from His love; nor will He hide his face from them when they "pour out their complaints

* Ezek. xiv. 3. Isa. i. 11—15.

before him, and shew him of their trouble." Nor should any real penitents be discouraged by the case of Saul. He was not humbled : he did not cry for mercy. If you, then, who have long maintained an opposition to God, are convicted of your guilt, and with a contrite spirit are supplicating pardon and peace ; if you feel your sins as a heavier burden than your most painful sufferings, you shall obtain your desire. Though Saul was rejected in righteous judgment, through the grace of Jesus you shall be received to favour.

Whither, then, did the wretched king betake himself? Alas ! how infatuated are the counsels of impenitent sinners ! As if in contempt or defiance of God, who had refused to answer him, he made application to a sorceress, and thus seemed to expect that direction and assistance from the devil, which had been denied him from Heaven. In his better days he had endeavoured to abolish witchcraft out of the land, as the divine law required : but now he began to " build again the things which he had destroyed," and with a daring profaneness pledged himself by his oath that no punishment should be inflicted on the witch whom he consulted. We inquire not by what method she practised her impious art, or held communications with Satan. Suffice it to say, that such an intercourse has been maintained, and that in these as well as other works of darkness it is desirable to be ignorant. We may be confident that any attempt of this nature to gain information or assistance, either by real or pretended enchantment, is an avowed rejection of God, which must be highly offensive to Him, and the

issue of which must be ruinous and fatal in the extreme.

Both Saul and the sorceress were confounded. He had expressed a wish to have an interview with Samuel, the departed Prophet, recollecting probably the benefit of his former counsels, and ignorantly supposing that this wicked woman could bring back his spirit at her will. She also, it should seem, expected, by some device or imposition of the devil, to produce an apparition in the resemblance of Samuel. But it pleased the Lord God himself to interpose, and to send the true Samuel, in order to confirm the sentence which he had before passed upon Saul, and to declare the divine determination to cut off that proud and impenitent offender the very next day. The Prophet then solemnly reproved him for the foolish and presumptuous imagination he had entertained, of receiving consolation from the creature, when he was forsaken of the Lord, and, in the name of the great Judge, pronounced upon him the irreversible condemnation.*

* It has been supposed that the person who appeared to Saul was Satan himself, or some evil spirit, assuming the character of Samuel. But we have no right to conclude, from the words of the sacred history, that it was any other than the very Prophet whose name is mentioned. The solemn address here made to Saul was such as suited the messenger of the Lord, in his life-time neglected and despised by the king, and now commissioned to ratify his former declarations.—But it is objected, that it were absurd and impious to imagine a wicked woman could have power to summon a departed saint by the profane arts of divination. This is readily granted; and we contend that the appearance was not effected by the influence of the witch, and that it was altogether different to

The king heard his awful doom, and yet, “after his hardness and impenitent heart,” he did not bend the knee, or put up one petition for mercy. He felt an alarm, and fainted, under the apprehension of his approaching destruction: nor can we conceive any thing more wretched upon earth than his condition upon Samuel’s departure. The witch endeavoured to administer support; a miserable comforter indeed! He revived, but he repented not; and nothing then remained for him but the “certain and fearful looking-for of judgment.” He prepared to meet the Philistines, and, with all the madness of desperation, rushed “as the horse into the battle.”

The event was answerable to the prediction. The Philistines prevailed against him: his army was utterly routed; his sons were slain; and he himself was sorely wounded.* Yet, even in that awful situation,

what she had expected and desired; for she was much terrified by it. But we see no inconsistency in allowing that God himself interposed at the very time that Satan was consulted, and sent his servant to declare the doom of an obdurate sinner. In the same manner the sorceries of Balak, the king of Moab, were overruled by a divine impulse on the mind of Balaam, who was constrained to pronounce a sentence quite opposite to his own wishes, and to those of the prince who had employed him, Numb. xxiii. Thus also, when Ahaziah, under a dangerous disease, dispatched his messengers to ask information of Baal-zebub as to the event, hoping, doubtless, for a favourable answer, the Lord God, to manifest His abhorrence of the wicked enterprise, commanded Elijah to meet them by the way, and to assure them from Him that the king should certainly die, 2 Kings, i. See *Letters on Infidelity*, page 242, &c.

* 1 Sam. xxxi. 1, &c.

he expressed no signs of contrition, no concern for his immortal soul; but his chief apprehension was, lest he should suffer indignities from the uncircumcised Philistines. In order, therefore, to avoid a disgraceful treatment from the hands of men, he requested his armour-bearer to destroy him; and, upon his refusal, in the violence of pride and despair, he fell upon his own sword, and thus became his own executioner.

We wonder not at any the most execrable wickedness, which one, given up to final impenitence, may perpetrate. "Lord, what is man!" What enormities is he capable of committing! From the examples of obdurate sinners we perceive what we ourselves might have been, or what we may still be, if the grace of God prevent not. Let us learn, then, under a sense of our entire depravity, to pray, "Hold thou me up, and I shall be safe: and I will have respect unto thy statutes continually."

We have seen Saul declining from very promising appearances of religion, and advancing from one degree of impiety to another, till at last he scrupled not to consult the devil himself, and then perished miserably by his own hand. In the different ages of the world, it has pleased God to suffer some such tremendous instances as this before us, that others may be instructed and warned. Let us, then, beware of formality and hypocrisy. If the heart be not upright, whatever favourable beginnings there may be, there cannot be an uniform perseverance in goodness, or any happy conclusion. Let us fear to depart from the clear line of duty in any the minutest circumstance; for many

have fallen by little and little. It will, therefore, be of the first importance to cherish every holy desire and resolution, and to revere the dictates of conscience. If that solemn monitor be slighted, if the Spirit of God be resisted, by a continual course of disobedience, the consequences must be terrible. But let not those consequences be laid to the charge of our gracious God; for none are given up to blindness and obduracy, as Saul was, but those who have abused their privileges, stifled their convictions, and violated their own express engagements. Nor should any persons, however heinous or complicated their guilt has been, suppose that they are in Saul's abandoned state, so long as they are desirous to serve God in newness of life. We ask, Is your sin your burden? And is it your prayer that you may be entirely conformed to the image of God? Then He is with you; and while you devote yourselves to Him, in his covenant, He says, "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee."

It might seem surprising, if we were not habituated to the observation, that the example of Saul, in destroying himself, is defended, applauded, and imitated. The king of Israel sought to hide himself from shame and captivity: and is it not almost fashionable among ourselves for men who are in perplexity and distress to seek relief in suicide? A miserable refuge indeed! Because our circumstances are reduced, our friends desert us, our characters become infamous, shall we presumptuously rush into the presence of our Judge by an act of the highest rebellion, and thus consign our souls to eternal perdition? What madness can

be compared to this? We pronounce not upon the case of those, who, by misfortune, temptation, or disease, are deprived of understanding. But where self-murder is committed, as we fear it is in numerous instances, deliberately, and with the possession of reason, there is not the least ground to expect forgiveness, since it is an offence for which there can be no repentance. It is also an aggravation of this sin, that the self-destroyer not only plunges himself into endless wretchedness, but involves many surviving friends and relations, who have deserved no such treatment from him, in the deepest affliction.

May we, therefore be prepared for the hour of trial! As it is the grand artifice of the devil to persuade sinners, under extreme difficulties, to fly to this act of desperation, it may be of use to fortify the mind against it by a serious consideration of its heinousness before God, and even of its miserable consequences in society. But our security is not in ourselves. Let us seek protection for Him "who keepeth Israel." Let us watch and pray; and "take unto us the whole armour of God, that we may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand." Amen.

DAVID.

CHAP. VI.—SECT. I.

David of a low extraction—appointed to the throne—called to court—conquered Goliath—preferred, but soon persecuted by the king—married Michal—prudent and beloved—protected from Saul's violence—fled for his life—called on Ahimelech—took refuge with the Philistines—removed to Judah—wandered under the care of Heaven—rescued from Saul by an invasion of the Philistines.

SCARCELY any part of divine revelation has escaped the malicious censures and profane scoffs of infidels. They have racked their invention, and exerted all the poignancy of their wit, to discredit the sacred writings, by attempting to prove them false, or absurd, or contradictory. But we need not fear the event, “The words of the Lord are pure words;” and they will abide for ever, though sinners may impiously dare to deny or oppose them.

The character of David has been attacked with peculiar severity. Much pains have been taken to give the most unfair representations of his conduct, in order to render his very name contemptible and odious. But the objections against David, it should

seem, originate from a desire to invalidate the Scriptures in general, and if possible, to overturn the whole system of revelation. Feeble, however, are the strongest assaults against the bulwarks of the Almighty. "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh : the Lord shall have them in derision."

Perhaps, indeed, some zealous advocates for the Bible have not defended their cause in the most able and judicious manner, and, by their imprudence, may have given their adversaries an advantage. There are those who justify the conduct of David with such a warmth of attachment as unfits them for taking a fair estimate of his character ; for they allow not any defect. A regard to truth must oblige us to confess that there were, upon different occasions, many things in his temper and behaviour, which we are at a loss to account for, and some which we must blame and condemn.

This concession does not invalidate the Scriptures, or contradict any one doctrine of revelation. Whatever David was, "the foundation of God standeth sure," and "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Even the description of the very grievous offences which saints of the first eminence have committed, and which unbelievers bring as an objection to the Bible, may be urged with great force in its defence ; for hereby the sacred writers have proved that they had no private purpose to serve : they represented the truth as it was, confident that the cause of religion could suffer nothing by a faithful and simple relation of facts. Very unlike common historians, they have

taken no pains to celebrate the excellence, or to conceal or extenuate the faults, of their favourite characters.

We need not fear, then, to give a plain and impartial account of the person before us ; nor do we hesitate to assert that his example claims our warmest esteem and admiration, and that, in the general tenour and principal circumstances of his life, he may properly be proposed as a distinguished pattern to all the church of God. But “let no man glory in men :” none are found spotless but He who is emphatically called, “THE HOLY ONE OF GOD.” Yet the very misconduct of those who have made the highest attainments in religion will furnish us with important and useful admonitions. Only, for this purpose, we must lay aside a cavilling and licentious spirit, and be endued with an humble obedient disposition.

David was placed in a very exalted situation ; and he received a peculiar honour in being constituted, not merely the king of Israel, but also an illustrious prophet of God, a progenitor and type of the Saviour. The divine Providence raised him up in an extraordinary way, and, for eminent services, took him from a state of obscurity, and fixed him in a post of supreme dignity. His father Jesse, we understand, possessed no considerable rank, and dwelt at Beth-lehem, which was “little among the thousands of Judah.” David was the youngest of the family, the most unlikely to be brought into public notice, and trained from his youth to the occupation of a shepherd ; yet, from such a low condition, he was elevated to the throne. The change

appeared so astonishing, that it filled him with the most grateful admiration, even to the end of life. It is agreeable to the general method of God's proceedings to work by means which are thought weak and ineffectual. He puts contempt upon all human greatness; and, while he accomplishes the most important events by instruments utterly insignificant, He proves that "the excellency of the power" is all his own, and that "the help, which is done upon earth, He doeth it himself."

Years before Christ, 1064. When the Lord had declared his determination of rejecting Saul from the kingdom, he directed Samuel to provide a successor among the sons of Jesse.* It should seem that David had been well nigh overlooked by the Prophet, on account of his youth and absence from home. When he was sent for, indeed, his meek and beautiful appearance were enough to conciliate esteem; yet he obtained the appointment, not as having a fair countenance, but as being "the man after God's own heart." For, immediately on his coming before Samuel, the Lord said, "arise, anoint him; for this is he." As an intimation then, of God's infallible purpose to bring him to the throne, the consecrating oil was poured upon him, in the presence of his brethren; and probably, for some time, the circumstances were not known beyond the extent of that household.

God disposes of his favours in a sovereign manner, and sometimes very differently to our wishes and expectations. In many instances we have observed that

* 1 Sam. xvi. 1, &c.

He has chosen the younger in preference to the elder branches of a family. He selects whom He will for the advancement of his own glory, and is not accountable to us for any of his dispensations. We are ready to fix our regard on outward appearances ; but we are admonished, as Samuel was, that “the Lord seeth not as man seeth ;” and we ought to remember that “He is the Judge ; He putteth down one, and setteth up another.” He is pleased, however, to give a suitable degree of strength and wisdom to those whom He calls to any difficult and important service. “The Spirit of the Lord came upon David, from that day forward,” and qualified him with every necessary endowment for the high station to which he was appointed. He was not, indeed, immediately set upon the throne, but gradually prepared for his exaltation by a long and painful course of discipline.

Very soon after he had been anointed by Samuel, a remarkable providence opened the way for his introduction at court, where he might be instructed in the administration of public affairs. On account of Saul’s dejected state, David, whose talents had begun to excite admiration, was recommended to his notice ; and the music of his harp, accompanied probably with the divine psalms of this “sweet singer of Israel,” composed the distracted mind and alleviated the distress of the king. His abilities and amiable deportments conciliated Saul’s esteem, and procured him distinguished marks of favour. And yet, for some time, he was not constantly resident in the palace ; but, though honoured with the royal friendship, he did not disdain

his former humble employment.* “ He returned from Saul to feed his father’s sheep at Beth-lehem.”* Nor should we forget that a diligent attention to the duties of our proper calling, of whatever kind they be, is indispensably requisite, and will be the best preparation for further advancement and usefulness in life, if such should be designed for us. In that retired situation David received intimations of future victories, while he was miraculously strengthened to slay a lion and a bear in the defence of his flock. This deliverance, we find, confirmed his dependence upon God, and emboldened him with the greater confidence to meet succeeding trials.

His faith and his courage were soon called forth, and displayed in a very glorious manner. How interesting is the account of his combat with Goliath! Our attention therein is directed not merely to the pious ardour of David, but to that divine power which was exerted by so feeble an instrument. Being sent by his father to visit his brethren in the field of battle, he arrived amongst them at the very time that the proud Philistine was insulting the armies of Israel, and filling them all with terror and dismay. Immediately he felt a holy indignation when he perceived the reproach cast upon the people, and upon the God of Israel, by that vaunting enemy, and expressed a desire to wipe away the disgrace. But he received a severe check from his eldest brother, who, probably through envy, accused him of deserting his proper employment, and ascribed his zeal for God to “ the pride and the

* 1 Sam, xvii, 15, &c.

naughtiness of his heart." Surely it becomes the friend of religion to be roused from his supineness, and to stand forth with a manly courage in defence of the cause of God, when its adversaries triumph. But let him not be surprised, or disheartened, if the basest principles be imputed to him, as they were to David, and especially if his near relations frown upon him and oppose him; but let him learn from this pious youth not to return " railing for railing." He replied only, with great gentleness of spirit, " What have I now done? Is there not a cause?" And in general it will be found that " a mild answer turneth away wrath."

David was not afraid to avow his intentions before the king, but with much firmness he proposed himself as ready to meet the giant in single combat. The offer was thought ridiculous; his age, his comparative weakness, and inexperience in war, were urged as strong objections: but he overruled them all by declaring his confidence in God, who had supported and preserved him in former dangers. With what defence, then, shall he be provided for the fight? The armour of Saul was at first put upon him; but, being unaccustomed to such a dress, he rejected it, and advanced into the field with no other weapons than his staff, and his sling, and five smooth stones in his shepherd's bag. Thus the strength of his faith, and the gracious interposition of God in his favour, more clearly appeared. The very weakness of those instruments, which the Lord generally employs for any signal deliverance, displays and magnifies his own power, and abases the pride of man.

The feeble combatant was disdained in the eyes of the haughty Philistine, who cursed him by his gods, and threatened to destroy him instantly. But David was not to be moved by the fierceness of his looks, or the terror of his menaces. He declared that he stood forth in the present conflict, depending solely on the divine aid, and desirous to vindicate the injured honour of the God of Israel. He expressed also the firmest confidence, that, mean and contemptible as his own appearance might be, he should obtain the victory over the insulting champion and the numerous host of the Philistines, and that the God in whom he trusted would be known and glorified by the issue of the battle. Nor was this a vain boast; the contest was immediately decided in favour of the stripling, who with his sling and a stone brought down the mighty warrior to the ground, and thus procured a complete triumph to his country.

To what, then, shall we ascribe the bravery and the success of David? Not to the exertion of a mere natural temper, but to the influence of those divine principles, faith and zeal. The history is recorded for the instruction and encouragement of future ages, that all may be excited to lay themselves out for the honour of God, and the support of his cause, whatever dangers may threaten them; and that they may learn to face the most tremendous adversaries with a bold and unshaken reliance on the promised help of God. There is one conflict, in which all the followers of the Lamb are, and must be, engaged: one enemy, more formidable than Goliath, challenges the

armies of Israel. But "resist the devil, and he will flee from you." Only go forth to the battle with the faith of David, and the powers of darkness shall not stand against you. But, ah! how often have you been foiled, through "an evil heart of unbelief."

So signal a victory could not but advance the reputation of David. The king himself became more attached to him, and from that time would not suffer him to return to his former occupation as a shepherd, but retained him at court.* There, also, it pleased God to raise him up a friend, who was designed to be a support and comfort to him in his succeeding trials. Jonathán, the son and the presumptive heir of Saul, discovered an affection for him, which was disinterested, ardent, and abiding: for "he loved him as his own soul." The conduct of David in that exalted station was most amiable, and such as recommended him to the esteem both of the courtiers and of the people; for he was obedient and faithful to his prince, and manifested a singular prudence in every part of his deportment. How often do success and preferment inebriate the mind, and cherish the vilest principles! Very few are proof against the snares of greatness, especially when elevated from a low condition.

But the most painful afflictions awaited him; and his honours were soon imbittered to him. Saul, who had, probably, taken him as his companion, perceived, as they went from place to place, his growing popularity, and heard the songs of the women celebrating his late conquest of Goliath. He considered himself, there-

* 1 Sam. xviii. 1, &c.

fore, as sinking into neglect and contempt, and looked upon his faithful servant with an envious and malignant eye. This was the rise of that long and severe persecution, through which we are now to accompany the son of Jesse. And here we shall observe him as a man of sorrows, yet the constant object of the divine care. He was harassed with extreme sufferings; but an invisible hand, powerful and irresistible, conducted him through them all. It was the purpose of God to set him on the throne, and nothing could prevent it. The very trials he met with were intended to prepare him for his future advancement; for which, probably, he would have been unfit at the first. The Lord watched over him with a parental tenderness, fought his battles for him, administered strong consolation to him, and gave him a happy issue out of all his afflictions. Is it not thus He deals with those whom "He prepares unto glory?" Though he loves them most affectionately, He does not therefore exempt them from trouble, but rather calls them to it. Though "it is his good pleasure to give them the kingdom," He does not put them into immediate possession, but leads them to it through much tribulation, and makes that very tribulation the means of fitting them for it. Let them not murmur at his gracious appointment, nor distrust his care, but look forward, with joyful expectation, to the crown which is laid up for them.

For a long time David was kept in continual apprehension of falling by the murderous hand of the king. Twice together he narrowly escaped the javelin, which was intended to smite him. Yet he persevered in the

same meek and respectful behaviour towards his persecutor. He was removed from court, under the pretext of being preferred; but in his new situation he acted with so much wisdom, and discovered such evident signs of being favoured with the divine Presence and blessing, that he gained the esteem of the whole nation. This very circumstance increased the enmity of Saul against him. He was then sent to fight against the Philistines, that he might perish in the battle; with a promise, indeed, of receiving the king's eldest daughter in marriage, if he should prove victorious. But, upon his return, he met with the utmost contempt; for the princess was given to be the wife of another man.

A second offer, of the same invidious kind, was made to David. Michal, Saul's youngest daughter, was proposed and engaged to him, if he would undertake another expedition against the Philistines, and destroy a hundred of them. He complained not of his former injurious usage; but, though he probably perceived the malicious purpose in the latter overture, he accepted it with a modest deference, and declined not the dangerous service on which he was desired to go. He was successful as before, and then, according to the compact, became the king's son-in-law. Yet, notwithstanding this near affinity, Saul was not the less enraged against him. David, however, in these very difficult circumstances, continued to exercise a singular meekness of wisdom in all his deportment, and was beloved and celebrated throughout the kingdom.

How uncommon is such prudence and discretion, especially under insults and provocations ! Let us inquire if we resemble this part of the exemplary character before us. Are we "behaving ourselves wisely in all our ways?" Is there no sinful omission, no rashness of spirit, no impropriety of conduct? We are forward, perhaps, to complain of our enemies; yet their opposition and perverseness will not excuse any wrong tempers in us, but should rather increase our circumspection and diligent attention to the duties of our station. We have seen that "the Lord was with David:" and if we also desire the Lord's presence, saying, as this holy man, "O, when wilt thou come unto me?" we must likewise form the same resolution, "I will walk within my house with a perfect heart."*

The most wise and upright deportment will not ensure a freedom from persecution. Every servant of the palace received a charge from the king to kill David,† who was therefore obliged to hide himself till the friendly offices of Jonathan appeased the anger of Saul against him for a season, and restored him to his place. His fresh successes against the Philistines rekindled the envious rage of Saul, and made his situation at court untenable. The javelin was again cast at him to destroy him, and he narrowly escaped to his own house. But even there his life was assaulted, and he was preserved only by his wife's subtlety. She let him down through the window, and, from necessity, he became a wretched wanderer. For a time he found refuge with Samuel, to whom he communicated

* Psal. ci. 2.

† 1 Sam. xix. 1, &c.

his distress. But the fury of Saul pursued him thither also. One messenger after another was sent to apprehend him : but, by a miraculous impression upon their minds, they were rendered incapable of executing their purpose ; and, as if they had forgotten their errand, they began to prophesy. The king himself followed them, probably with a determination to wreak his vengeance : but he also was “ among the prophets,” and thus afforded David the opportunity of escaping. How astonishing is the providence of God ! How various his ways of protecting his people ! He can never be at a loss to rescue them from the designs of their enemies, even when their case appears most desperate. Let them be encouraged to confide in Him, and to “ cast all their care upon him, for He careth for them.”

David had been wonderfully delivered at Naioth ; but he still considered himself in the most imminent danger. He fled to his beloved Jonathan, to represent his fears and distresses, and to consult with him upon the proper means of safety.* He dared not venture into the royal presence : and therefore it was concerted that Jonathan should make his apology for absence till the intentions of Saul were better understood. An affecting interview took place between these two friends, who bound themselves to each other, by the most solemn contract, to maintain their fidelity. It was not long before Jonathan was convinced of the continuance of his father's murderous designs ; and then, according to the expedient agreed on, he conveyed the painful information to David. The poor

* 1 Sam. xx. 1, &c.

persecuted youth arose from the cave in which he had been concealed, and, expressing his respect, his gratitude, and his love to Jonathan, in the most endearing manner; parted from him with extreme grief; and, being about to fly he knew not whither, he was commended by him to the care and protection of a faithful God.

It is, doubtless, every way right and proper to contrive for our safety in times of danger; and some circumstances may render it necessary for us to desert our place. In such cases, however, it should appear that our removal is indispensably requisite; and it should then be submitted to as the appointment of God. But, perhaps, David felt more distressing apprehensions on this occasion than became him to whom the promises were made. Doubtless he upbraided himself for his unbelief, and often said, "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me?" Alas! how weak, and how frequently interrupted, is the exercise of faith, in the strongest believers! Let us watch and pray against every distrusting thought, and quietly leave ourselves in the Lord's hands.

The friendship of Jonathan, from whom the severest opposition might have been expected, afforded the most sensible relief to David in his sorrow. This was a gracious dispensation from the Lord; and in the very same way He is pleased to support his afflicted people even now. Do we not recollect that He has again and again raised up for us a counsellor, a patron, and a comforter, where we had every thing to fear? Has He not, by the unlooked-for kindness of others, dried

up our tears, when we were overwhelmed with trouble ; and pleaded our cause when we were suffering under unjust reproaches and oppressions ? Let us remember, and rejoice, that he has the hearts of all men in his hands.

David was an exile from court, from his father's house, from his wife, and from his beloved Jonathan. A distressing situation truly ! The trial was so great, that his faith failed him, and he was betrayed into some inconsistencies, over which we might desire to draw a veil.—In his flight, he called to take his leave of the tabernacle, and, as his manner was, to consult the Lord by Ahimelech the high-priest.* There he was driven to a very sinful dissimulation and falsehood, in order to avoid suspicions, and to obtain some means of support and defence from the minister of religion. The consequences of this misconduct were fatal to many ; and David felt very strong compunction on account of it. Ah ! how dangerous it is, in any circumstances, to deviate from the strictest integrity !

He received from the hands of Ahimelech a part of the holy bread (in taking which he was justified by his pressing necessity†), and the sword of Goliath, which had been laid up before the Lord, and which might strengthen his faith, by reminding him continually of the miraculous deliverance he had before experienced. With this slender sustenance, and with no other armour, he proceeded on his way ; and, desiring only to secure himself, not to stir up a rebellion, he betook himself to the very enemies whom he had often sub-

* 1 Sam. xx.1, &c. xxii. 15.

† Matt, xii. 3, 4.

duced. The king of the Philistines was inclined to favour him ; but, when his character was known, the fears and suspicions of the courtiers were excited ; and it should seem that he could not long have subsisted in that country. Perhaps he was wrong in attempting it : at least he certainly was so in the very dishonourable expedient which he adopted for the preservation of his life. He feigned himself mad, that they might not apprehend any danger from him, and then was sent away as an useless or troublesome person.—We mourn for the distresses in which this holy man was involved ; or rather we lament, that, in his distresses, he did not always stand upright. But, while we blame his distrust and timidity, we fear for ourselves, and pray “ that we enter not into temptation.”

Banished from the Philistines, he was reduced to the necessity of hiding himself in a cave.* There he was joined by his parents and relations, who fled to him either to comfort him, or to protect themselves. There, also, a considerable company resorted to him : about four hundred men, of desperate fortunes, enlisted themselves under him, as their captain. Whatever might be their intentions, David made use of their assistance not to annoy or injure others, but to defend himself : and, wherever they encamped, they were a security to the inhabitants around them. In the midst of his distresses, we are pleased to observe his attention to his aged father and mother, and his anxious concern for their welfare. He took them to the king of Moab, and requested him to afford them

* 1 Sam. xxii. 1, &c.

a retreat, expressing his patient submission to God, and dependence upon Him for better days. This is an instructive example. Those, who possess eminent abilities and distinguished piety, may be, for a time, cut off from all opportunities of public usefulness : and yet, under the heaviest calamities, they may be reserved for the most exalted honours to themselves, and beneficial purposes to others. Let us learn, however, while we are solicitous for our own safety, not to forget what we owe to our parents : and, though our prospects be dark, let us remember the divine promises, and be willing to wait, as David, “ till we know what God will do for us.”

David, in his exile, was favoured with the company of the Prophet Gad, and, doubtless, was directed and comforted by his counsels and prayers. According to the advice, then, which he received from that spiritual guide, he removed into the land of Judah, though with extreme danger, that he might testify his reliance upon the protection of the Lord, and not be seduced by the practices of idolaters, who were friendly to him. Soon after this removal he was joined by Abiathar, the son of Ahimelech, who related to him the horrid murder which Saul had committed upon Ahimelech, the high-priest, and the other inferior ministers of religion. The account was most painful to David ; for he knew and confessed that his dissimulation had been the occasion of their death. From that time he retained Abiathar with him, giving him the strongest assurances of support, and pledging his own life for his security. The presence, the conversation, and the

services, of those "who minister about holy things," though generally disregarded, will ever be considered as a valuable acquisition by men of real piety: nor should they think any hazard or loss too great to be incurred for the sake of such a privilege.

David was persecuted on every side; but, far from betraying a vindictive spirit, he was ready to do good to all, whatever he might suffer for it. Notwithstanding his private distresses, he discovered a generous attention to the public welfare; and, while bold and vigorous in action, he shewed at the same time a constant dependence upon God for direction and success: an uncommon instance of martial courage and fervent devotion, united in the same person!

He was requested to defend the city of Keilah against the Philistines.* But, though willing to render his countrymen any service, he would not undertake the enterprise till he had first consulted the Lord. The approbation of Heaven was declared; yet his own followers opposed the measure, till a more express command, and promise of support from God himself, encouraged them to go. He went, therefore, and, by a signal victory, "saved the inhabitants of Keilah." But the very men whom he had rescued from destruction were on the point of delivering him into the hands of Saul. This was a severe trial indeed! Here, however, as on other occasions, he fled for refuge to his God; and, by his particular instruction, he forsook the town, and once more became a wanderer from place to place.—If religion have its proper

* 1 Sam. xxiii. 1, &c.

influence upon us, it will teach us to commit our way unto the Lord ; to consult His will, and not lean to our own understanding. Like David, we shall not be backward to obey the directions of our heavenly Guide, though the most formidable dangers threaten us. Nor shall we repent of doing good to any, even while we receive no other recompense than hatred and cruelty.

David encamped in the wilderness, and was pursued by the murderous king of Israel through the woods and the mountains. From day to day it seemed as if he should fall a prey to his enemy ; but he remained secure, under the immediate care of Heaven : “ God delivered him not into his hand.” In that distressed situation he was visited by Jonathan, his faithful friend, who, from religious principles, was firmly attached to him, and went, at the hazard of his own life, to “ strengthen his hand in God.” The pious youth reminded him of the divine promises, and encouraged him to look for a happy issue. The interview was conducted with the solemnities of devotion, and tended, doubtless, to dissipate the fear of David, and to comfort him in his trouble.

Soon afterwards his faith was again tried in a severe manner. Through the officious information of the Ziphites he was discovered to Saul ; and, being overtaken by that furious adversary, he was in the utmost danger of being surrounded, and entirely cut off. An escape appeared impossible. But the eye of God watched over him, and by His interposing providence, when all human succours failed, the threatening

blow was instantly averted. A sudden invasion of the Philistines called off the king to defend his country, and David was permitted to retire in safety.

Here we pause, and stand in admiration of the ways of God. We are ready to ask, Why does He suffer those, who are dearest to himself, to be so evil-entreated? But we repress our presumptuous inquiries. Suffice it for us that "He will not forsake his people, for his great name's sake," and that, in spite of all opposition, His gracious purposes concerning them shall be finally accomplished. Have we not seen His hand guiding, supporting, and protecting the persecuted son of Jesse? And have we not perceived, in many singular incidents throughout this part of the history, the divine power, love, and faithfulness, displayed? Do we not, also, upon the review of our own life, recollect various instances, in which the Lord has, almost visibly, interposed, to administer relief, and bring deliverance? Let not these remarkable events be ascribed to chance; but, surveying what God hath wrought for us, let us devoutly say, "This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes." Nor let us be dismayed at the prospect of future difficulties, "but stay ourselves upon Him "who is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in working." He can raise up for us, in the midst of our enemies, "a friend that sticketh closer than a brother," tender and constant as Jonathan. Sooner than his promise shall fail, He will commission the Philistines to effect our escape, at the very moment when our case may appear most desperate. Enough, at least, we learn from the saints

of old, to encourage our hope in God, contrary to all human probabilities. Nature, indeed, is averse, but faith will teach and enable us to "hope against hope." And this entire dependence upon Him is what God indispensably requires; for He declares, "If ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established."*

* Isa. vii. 9.

D A V I D.

SECT. II.

David spared Saul's life—provoked by Nabal—married Abigail—spared Saul a second time—retired to the Philistines—received by Achish—dismissed from his service—plundered by the Amalekites—recovered all from them—mourned for Saul and Jonathan—removed to Hebron, where he was acknowledged king.

THAT part of the life of David, which is now before us, exhibits to our view an instance of one who was chosen of God, and appointed to an exalted station, involved in the deepest distresses. Yet in him we behold “an example of suffering affliction and of patience.” At times, indeed, he was cast down through unbelief, as if the divine promise had come utterly to an end; but, upon the whole, he was enabled to maintain a firm dependence on the faithfulness of God, and to derive strong consolations from his religious principles. If we would know the particular state of his mind, we must consult his own declarations in the Psalms, which were penned under the influence of the Holy Ghost at those very seasons to which we allude. There we shall observe the most indubitable marks of eminent piety, a meek resignation to the dispensations of Providence, a sure trust in the everlasting covenant, an unequalled fervour of devotion, and, on some

occasions, such a degree of joy in the Lord, as carried him above his fears and calamities. May we so study his character that we may be partakers of the same spirit! Alas! are we not utterly destitute of these principles and affections? Where shall we discover the like ardour? Would not the most distant approach to it be censured as the wildness of fanatics and enthusiasts? Men are ashamed of any real earnestness in the service of God, and not afraid to avow their disregard and contempt of every thing truly serious. We are constrained to mourn for the open profaneness which prevails among us; and not less so for the indifference, formality, and hypocrisy, of many who profess godliness, who "have a name that they live, and are dead."

Do we consider the behaviour of David toward others? We shall find him possessed of the strictest integrity and the most amiable tempers, exercising not only patience and forbearance, but fidelity and kindness, in return for the basest perfidiousness and cruelty. We do not, indeed, assert that he betrayed no marks of imperfection; but we maintain that his conduct, in the general tenour of it, will afford an instructive example to all.

Years before
Christ, about
1061. He had retired, for his own security, to the rocks and wilderness of En-gedi, whither he was soon pursued by the malice of the king.* In this situation it pleased God to give him an opportunity of proving that he was very far from cherishing any sentiments of rebellion or revenge. For some necessary purpose Saul betook himself, without an attend-

* 1 Sam. xxiv. 1, &c.

ant to the same cave where David and his followers were concealed ; and of consequence the life of the prince lay entirely at the mercy of the man whom he was seeking to murder. It was immediately urged upon David, that this was such a convenient occasion for destroying his enemy as he ought not to neglect, being offered him by the providence of God, and in performance of the promise. How easily may we impose upon ourselves, interpret events as providential, and imagine that God is favouring our schemes, when we are contriving to gratify our own corrupt affections ! But David was not so misled. He could, in an instant, have vindicated his wrongs, and rescued himself from the hands of an enraged persecutor ; but he chose rather to refer the matter to the Lord, and to wait His time and way of deliverance. He knew, from the divine declarations, that he should one day sit upon the throne ; but he would not take any indirect step to place himself there. He rejected, then, with abhorrence, the proposal of assassinating the prince, whom the Lord had anointed, nor would he suffer others to commit violence upon him.

Saul, therefore, was permitted to escape without injury. David, indeed, had cut off the skirt of his garment, as a proof that he had full power over him, and that he was not influenced by any vindictive tempers towards him : yet, even for this trivial circumstance he was afterward grieved, lest it should be construed into irreverence and disaffection. But, as the king was departing, David cried after him, and, with all the tokens of respect, and with the strongest de-

clarations of fidelity and attachment to his service, expostulated with him on the unreasonableness, the cruelty, and sinfulness of his conduct, assuring him that he never could be induced by any considerations to lift up his hand against him, and yet reminding him that the Lord would shortly interpose, and determine the contest between them.—So tender an address, so striking an instance of forbearance and generosity, disarmed the furious persecutor of his rage, melted him down to tears, and constrained him to become a supplicant to the very person for whose blood he had been thirsting.

What astonishing effects are produced by meekness of spirit! Yet how rarely is such an example to be met with! It should seem, from the cast of modern times, that the forgiveness of injuries is a mean and despicable thing. But how different is the judgment of God, who hath declared, “The discretion of a man deferreth his anger, and it is his glory to pass over a transgression!”* The ministers of Christ, in opposition to the fashionable principles of honour, must call upon men “to forbear one another, and to forgive one another,” to lay aside their violent animosities, and, without considering the insults they have received, to unite in love and brotherly affection together.—It may not be improper to justify ourselves, when misrepresented and abused; but even this should be done in a peaceable and modest manner, as in the case before us. We should be willing to leave the vindication of all our wrongs to God, and quietly await

* Prov. xix. 11.

his determination. Ah ! how contrary is this to the impatient, ambitious, and vindictive desires of our hearts !

We have also cause to lament that those who are habitually meek and humble are liable to be hurried away by temporary emotions of pride and anger. David had sworn fidelity to Saul, but could not trust the most solemn assurances of that perfidious prince, and therefore still maintained the same prudent caution. He continued to wander, as a poor distressed exile, from one cave and wilderness to another. In this situation he was reduced to the want of necessaries ; and, being averse to any schemes of plunder for his support, he sent to a rich neighbour to entreat his kindness, at a time of festivity and mirth.* David, indeed, seemed to have some claim upon Nabal ; for he had carefully protected his flocks and possessions from the injurious assaults of others. But his application was rejected, and both he and his followers were treated with the utmost contempt and reproach. Upon this occasion, David, who had been proof against the insults and cruelties of Saul, being betrayed into an angry and revengeful spirit, both threatened and prepared to destroy the churl, and every male in his family. We pretend not to justify so rash and barbarous a resolution ; for we confess it to be highly disgraceful to David's character. But we maintain that it was contrary to his general deportment ; and when, by the prudence of Abigail, his resentment was pacified, he

* 1 Sam. xxv. 2, &c.

himself perceived and acknowledged the injustice and sinfulness of his scheme, and praised God that He had mercifully prevented him from executing his wicked purpose.

Alas! what continual need we have to "watch and pray, lest we enter into temptation!" Though we have been upheld in past dangers, this will be no security to us in future. We may have been unmoved by very great provocations, and yet soon be overcome by a trifling affront, if we be off our guard. Shall we not also, with David, admire and praise the overruling providence and restraining grace of our God, who, though he has suffered us to proceed to the very point of committing some heinous iniquity, has interposed, most seasonably, to hinder us from bringing guilt upon ourselves, and mischief upon others? Let us entreat Him that He would "hedge up our way," rather than leave us to dishonour his cause, and ruin our own souls.

Nabal was suddenly removed by the righteous judgment of God, and Abigail became the wife of David, who, probably, in the late instance, had been struck with her sense, her prudence, and her piety. This holy man, like many of the ancient saints, gave into the prevailing custom of polygamy. The practice, however, is not hereby justified: it was permitted for a time; but its consequences have always been extremely pernicious, and it is now expressly prohibited by the highest authority.*

* Mark x. 11.

On another occasion we behold him exercising the same lenity and forbearance towards Saul as he had done before. He was still hunted by the treacherous prince, and still he refused to adopt any other measures against him than his own defence rendered absolutely needful. With an astonishing courage, or rather a peculiar degree of faith, he ventured in the dead of night to the very spot where Saul and his army were encamped; and, as they were all in a deep sleep, he had full opportunity of gratifying his revenge, if he had entertained any such design.* But though he was exhorted to it by his attendant, he abstained from violence, not through political, but religious motives, convinced that he could not "stretch forth his hand against the Lord's anointed, and be guiltless." He expressed his confidence that the Lord would in due time deliver him from his adversary: in patient expectation of that event, he was willing to remain a sufferer, and would not avenge himself. The spear and the cruse of water were taken from the king's head, and held up to him as a proof that his life had again been spared. In the tenderest and most affectionate manner, David once more expostulated with him on his injurious conduct, and warned him of the awful consequences. This fresh instance of generosity had a surprising effect upon Saul; and, from his strong professions, we should have thought that an immediate reconciliation would follow. But David, through an evident distrust of his declarations, departed from

* 1 Sam. xxvi. 4, &c.

him, and referred the decision of the contest to the righteous Governor of heaven.

Such patient perseverance in dependence upon God reproves our vehemence of spirit, our unwillingness to wait the disposal of Providence. What eagerness do we discover to extricate ourselves from our trifling difficulties, forgetting that "the Lord reigneth!" And do we not betray sad marks of a petulant, implacable, vindictive disposition toward those who injure us? If so, we possess little of the faith or meekness of David.

Yet even this eminent saint lived not in the constant exercise of his own principles. Wearied out with the length of his trials, or unmindful of the divine promise, and giving way to the suggestions of unbelief, he said in his heart, "I shall now perish one day by the hand of Saul."* Afraid, therefore, to remain any longer in the land of Judah, where he had been hitherto protected; he consulted his safety without asking direction from the Lord, and sought a place of refuge even among the enemies of Israel, in the country of the Philistines. This doubtless, was a wrong step; and it is no wonder that he was hereby led into various difficulties and temptations. Ah! what a train of evils follows from unbelief! When we forget our past experience of the Lord's mercies, and his gracious assurances, we shall be overwhelmed with desponding apprehensions, and, probably, be induced to adopt some dishonourable expedient, in order to get rid of our troubles. How many, who a little while ago could triumph in the security of the covenant, are now dis-

* 1 Sam, xxvii. 1, &c.

mayed with terrible fear, and say, I shall finally perish! And are there not those, too, who, in an anxious concern for their own preservation, and that of their families, have formed very unsuitable connexions with irreligious characters? We shall not, then, be surprised to hear that they are carried from one inconsistency to another. Nothing can so effectually establish us in holy tempers and practices, and preserve us from perplexities, as an unshaken dependence upon the promises of God in Christ Jesus.

Achish, the king of the Philistines, was disposed to favour David, and, probably with the hopes of separating him entirely from the interests of Israel, afforded both him and his followers a comfortable retreat. While he was in that situation, he made incursions upon the Amalekites and their neighbours, whom the Lord had commanded to be destroyed, and utterly desolated their towns: but, to avoid the displeasure of Achish, and to encourage the idea that he was faithfully attached to the Philistines, he was guilty of a mean equivocation; for he pretended to have been fighting against his own countrymen. This was such an instance of dissimulation as we may account for, indeed, but attempt not to defend. Let us beware of associating with those who cannot act in concert with us as the servants of God; for their friendship may be a snare to us, either deterring us from the discharge of our duty, or leading us to some base artifice, that we may conceal what they dislike. The patronage of wicked men is rarely preserved with a good conscience.

David was brought into another difficulty by this connexion with the Philistines. They were preparing for war against Israel, and Achish required him to join the expedition.* His perplexity on this occasion must have been great; for how should he turn his arms against his own nation? and yet how should he refuse to obey the injunction of a king who had received and protected him? He appeared to acquiesce in the scheme, and, together with his forces, followed the hosts of the Philistines. But it pleased God, who alone can work deliverance, to extricate him from his embarrassment. The lords of the Philistines suspected his integrity; and, in compliance with their requisition, Achish, though most reluctantly, dismissed him from his service; and, with high commendations of his character, entreated him to retire. The release was critical, and must have gratified the wishes of David. Yet, desirous of the prince's favour, he seemed to lament that he was injuriously prevented from testifying his fidelity. His professions, we own, carry with them the marks of duplicity, and are utterly inconsistent with that openness and simplicity which we have a right to expect from a servant of God. But the smiles of a court are dangerous to virtue: and those, who needlessly attach themselves to such as are enemies to the Israel of God, will not long persevere in an honourable conduct: for they generally "fall into temptation and a snare."

The Lord had mercifully delivered David from the necessity to which he was reduced, either of perfidiously deserting the Philistines, or of being accessory

* 1 Sam. xxviii. 1, 2. xxix. 1, &c.

to the destruction of Israel. Yet a heavy calamity awaited him ; and it appears to have been the divine purpose to punish and to humble him, for his unbelief and neglect of God in seeking the protection of aliens. His city, to which he was returning, was taken by the Amalekites, and utterly consumed with fire ; his wives and family, and those of all his followers, were led into captivity, and all their possessions plundered.* This alone would have been extremely distressing ; but the anguish of his spirit was increased by the rage of his own people against him. They blamed him as the cause of all their trouble, and formed the design of killing him. In so embarrassed a situation, what support or expedient was left him ? Here we behold the power and the excellence of faith. “ He encouraged himself in the Lord his God.” Though all men forsook him, he still doubted not that the Lord would stand by him and save him ; and therefore, confiding in His faithfulness and strength, he expected a happy issue.

By our own unadvised schemes, originating from impatience and distrust, we may involve ourselves in a variety of difficulties ; yet even then, though shame and humiliation become us, we need not, we should not, cast away our hope in God. He is still ready to pardon, and spare, and protect us ; and, therefore, looking to His promises, we may encourage ourselves in Him.

But, while we expect support from the Lord, we must seek it in prayer, and in a diligent attention to

* 1 Sam. xxx. 1, &c.

the means which He hath appointed. David, we fear, had neglected to do this when he fled to the Philistines ; but now his first object was, to consult the Lord, by the high-priest. Having obtained a favourable answer, with amazing activity and courage he pursued, overtook, and conquered the enemy, and soon recovered from them all their spoil, and all their prisoners ; for the plunderers had been restrained from offering violence to their persons, by an overruling influence upon their minds. The victory, which was complete, he devoutly ascribed to God. Nor did he manifest his piety alone upon that occasion ; his justice to the weak enfeebled soldiers, whom he would not suffer to be defrauded, and his generosity to the friends who had espoused his cause, were also conspicuous.

Thus, we perceive, the compassion of God is extended to those who trust Him. He graciously mitigates and removes the troubles which their folly has incurred. O, may we learn to ask counsel of Him, and then go forth in obedience to his directions, and in reliance upon his promise. Nor let us forget, in attention to devotion, the duties we owe to one another. How many have claims upon us ! It will be a disgrace to our religion, if, in the hour of prosperity, we do not plead in behalf of the helpless, or if we be unmindful of those who have attached themselves to our interest.

Years before We are now arrived at one of the most **Christ, 1056.** important eras of David's life. About the time when he was involved in his late complicated distresses, the decisive blow was struck by the Philis-

tines, and Saul, the king of Israel, was slain in the battle.* This was an event at which, we might have supposed, he would have rejoiced exceedingly; since his furious persecutor was removed, and his way to the throne was cleared. But, far from a revengeful or ambitious spirit, he sought not the ruin of his enemy, nor took one step to procure his own advancement. Nay, when the tidings were brought him, "he rent his clothes, he mourned, he wept, he fasted," and even avenged the death of Saul upon the Amalekite, who boasted of having murdered the Lord's anointed.

This last action of David is censured, as an instance of cruelty and injustice. But what would have been said had the man been rewarded and preferred? It ought not to be forgotten that he was one of that accursed nation which the Lord had devoted to destruction, and that, according to his own confession, he had deserved to die, for taking away the life of the prince.†

The whole deportment of David manifests the utmost reverence for Saul, and strongest attachment to him. He seemed desirous that his memory should be handed down to posterity with respect, lamenting his loss in a most beautiful elegy, which celebrated the

* 2 Sam. i. 1, &c.

† As Saul is said to have fallen upon his own sword, it is probable that the Amalekite's account was false, and that he had invented the story with the expectation of a recompense. David, however, not knowing the circumstances, did right in treating the man suitably to his own confession.

talents and achievements of the deceased monarch, and cast a veil over his criminal and injurious conduct. His distress, doubtless, was increased by the death of his most amiable and beloved friend Jonathan, who also perished in the same battle, and for whom he mourned with expressions of pungent grief. But to an ambitious mind this would have been a joyful circumstance, because Jonathan might have proved a formidable rival, being next in succession to the throne, and a peculiar favourite with the people.

Is not such disinterestedness uncommon? Do we often observe men to weep with undissembled sorrow at the removal of those who obstruct their views of preferment in the world? Or, is there any thing in David's behaviour to countenance an opposition to just government? His carriage, throughout, was far from that of a seditious, proud, and aspiring person: and we are constrained to own that his exaltation was of God.

The regal office was now vacant: and who shall undertake it, or dispose of it? The divine commission had been issued some time before, appointing David to it; and this had been generally understood. Multitudes, therefore, of the Israelites, upon the death of Saul, flocked to him at Ziklag, with an expectation, probably, of his coming to the immediate possession of the kingdom. Nor had he forgotten the promise: but, as he looked to receive the power from the hands of the Lord, so he determined to do nothing without His direction. According to the instituted means, he inquired of God whether he should remove into the

land of Judah : and, by express revelation, he returned to his native country, and fixed his residence at Hebron.* There he began his reign, though for some years his authority was not complete. The men of Judah acknowledged his right to the crown, and with the usual solemnities publicly proclaimed him their king.

Here, then, his trials might seem to be ended ; for he had before him the flattering prospect of dominion, wealth, and dignity. In the patient expectation of this event, he had endured extreme sufferings ; and at length he was not disappointed of his hope. “ He that believeth shall not make haste.” Whence arises our precipitation, or our distress, when the purposes of God are delayed ? Do we not stagger in our minds through unbelief ? Therefore every trifling difficulty hides the promise from our eyes, and excites many tumultuous fears within us. But the present history will teach us, that “ there is no wisdom, nor understanding, nor counsel, against the Lord.”† Saul had long laboured to prevent the accession of the son of Jesse to the throne. But all his schemes ended in confusion : and so indeed must end all opposition to the cause of God. If He be for us, it matters little who, or what, can be against us. The poor persecuted saint struggled for many years with a violent enemy ; but he was preserved from all assaults by an invisible almighty hand, and at last crowned with glory. Surely the dealing of God with his church of old should encourage our hope and confidence, amidst

* 2 Sam. ii. 1, &c.

† Prov. xxi. 30.

difficulties which appear insupportable. What, though our conflict be sharp, and “ we have no might against this great company that cometh against us,” let us fly to the God of Jacob for our refuge ; let us trust, and not be afraid ; and soon shall our strongest adversaries be subdued under our feet, and we shall be put in possession of a kingdom infinitely better than that of David, a kingdom that cannot be moved.”

What were David’s sentiments upon his advancement his psalms will testify ; for in them he breathed out the devout affections of his soul, and called on all the people to join with him in admiring and praising that astonishing dispensation which had brought him to the throne. Ah ! how different from that proud imperious spirit, that profane contempt of God, which generally accompanies men who rise to a state of greatness ! Such meekness, and such piety, as we observe in “ the sweet singer of Israel,” are rare endowments every where, more especially so amidst the insnaring scenes of grandeur.

But we turn our eyes to one of higher excellence and dignity than the king of Judah : we behold Jesus, the Son of David, made like to his progenitor and type. He also passed through much tribulation, continued for many years in the deepest abasement, “ being despised and rejected,” and endured a conflict of all others the most violent. But in vain were the powers of earth and hell united against Him : the decree was gone forth, and nothing could reverse it. The Lord God had said that He would “ give unto him the throne of his father David,” and that “ of his kingdom

there should be no end.”* To that throne he is now exalted, and all nations are required to yield an unreserved submission to Him. Who are they, then, that allow his claim, and “take his yoke upon them?” Alas! we dwell among such as are his avowed opponents. Do not the lives and tempers of thousands declare, whatever their tongues may profess, that they are disaffected to His government, and are not to be ranked with his subjects? But let them fear the effects of his wrath; for He will maintain his right. O, bow to the sceptre of his grace, and cheerfully receive him in his regal character! And let those who acknowledge him for their Sovereign not be ashamed or wearied of his service, but boldly testify to others the blessedness they have enjoyed under Him. “Let the children of Zion be joyful in their King.”

* Luke i. 32, 33.

D A V I D.

SECT. III.

David recompensed the men who buried Saul—opposed by Ish-bosheth—distressed by the murder of Abner—punished the murderers of Ish-bosheth—declared king of all Israel—his great prosperity—prepared to conduct the ark to Jerusalem—displeased at Uzzah's death—brought the ark with great joy—his attention to the public worship and to family religion—despised by his wife Michal—forbidden to build the temple—yet comforted by the divine promises.

WE have followed David through a long series of trials, which, though most afflictive, contributed to his advantage, and prepared him for succeeding greatness, and extensive usefulness. We have seen the divine promises to him fulfilled, the formidable opposition against him vanquished, and the poor persecuted youth, who was taken from the sheep-folds, immediately after the death of Saul, seated on the throne of Judah. His difficulties, indeed, were not all ended; but a scene of another kind now opens upon us. We shall now behold the man, who was obliged to hide himself “in dens and caves of the earth,” advanced to the most elevated dignity. Nor will his example, in these very different circumstances, fail to convey to us many profitable lessons of instruction.

Years before Christ, 1055. He began his reign with an action which must have tended to conciliate the affections of the people, and showed that he was not actuated by ambition, envy, or revenge. He recompensed the inhabitants of Jabesh-gilead for their loyal regard to their deceased monarch in burying his remains, which they had rescued from the insults of the Philistines.* But the most disinterested conduct will not always prevent prejudice and opposition. Abner, who had been a principal officer in Saul's army, and now probably aspired after power, set up Ish-bosheth, the son of Saul, and prevailed upon the tribes of Israel to receive him for their king, and to reject the man whom the Lord had declared to be the object of His choice. This betrayed an ungrateful, perverse, and rebellious spirit in them; but it proved a blessing to David. For by this resistance further evidence was given of the Lord's faithfulness and love to him; and his own wisdom, piety, meekness, and patience, were also manifested and increased.

At first, it should seem, David acted only upon the defensive; but, after two years, the turbulence and pride of Abner and his party stirred up a civil war, which, though attended with much bloodshed, issued in the advancement of David to the complete possession of the regal power. "There was long war between the house of Saul and the house of David: but David waxed stronger and stronger, and the house of Saul waxed weaker and weaker."†—The purposes of God, however opposed, cannot be defeated. The

* 2 Sam. ii. 5, &c.

† iii. 1, &c.

kingdom of Jesus must spread from one degree of enlargement to another, till it subdue and incorporate all nations of the earth. The adversaries of the Lord will be found liars, and all their machinations turn to their own confusion. Believers, fear not to trust your concerns in the hand of your gracious God. He suffers you to struggle for a while with powerful and malicious foes ; but, depending on the promise, you shall renew your strength, and gain continual advantages, till your enemies be perfectly and for ever vanquished and destroyed.

The leaders of the faction began to quarrel among themselves ; and Abner, offended by the reproaches of Ish-bosheth, undertook, through a spirit of proud revenge, to alienate his subjects from him, and attach them to David's interest. The proposal was made to David, and a treaty entered into. As a preliminary article, the king insisted upon the restoration of his wife Michal, who, by the violence of her father Saul, had been torn from him, and given to another. The scheme seemed ripe for execution, when it was frustrated by a catastrophe most painful to David. His principal officers, Joab and his brother Abishai, who were men of an insolent and vindictive disposition, had obtained such an influence over him, that he knew not how to restrain them. In a treacherous manner they contrived to assassinate the very person who was using his interest to deliver up the whole government to their master. This detestable perfidy deserved the most rigorous punishment. Perhaps David was blameable for not putting the murderers to death. But, in such an

unsettled state, he felt his own weakness, and dreaded the consequences of severity : for the present, therefore, the offenders escaped with impunity. If we presume to censure his lenity, we must allow, at least, that those who possess the highest authority cannot do all they would. We should compassionate rather than envy their situation. Their hands are often tied by some or other of their subjects ; and they are obliged to adopt the complaint of David, " I am this day weak, and these men be too hard for me."

Yet his conduct on this occasion discovered an integrity and a tenderness of mind which endeared him to his people. He was struck with horror at the iniquity of the transaction ; and while he solemnly protested his innocence, he deprecated the divine vengeance from himself and his kingdom, and foretold the heavy judgments which would surely fall on the head of the guilty. To testify his respect for the deceased, he commanded his burial to be attended by Joab, the principal assassin, and his numerous retinue. He himself also followed the bier with loud lamentations, and in the whole of his deportment showed the most unfeigned sorrow. And are we all, in our several stations, grieved for the wickedness which we are compelled to witness, and which we cannot prevent or remedy ? Do " our souls weep in secret places for the pride" and the many abominations which prevail around us ? Ah ! whence this indifference about the actions of others, but from a total disregard of the honour of God and the salvation of our fellow-creatures ?

Very soon afterward the desired event took place,

but in a way which David neither contrived nor approved. Ish-bosheth, the competitor for the government, was murdered by two of his servants, who carried his head to David, and expected from him a reward for their villany.* But he sought not power by such base treachery as this : and therefore, though the opposition against him was hereby defeated, he was shocked with the horrible wickedness they had committed, and as a righteous judge, he instantly commanded them to be put to death. He looked for his advancement from the Lord, and would not adopt or countenance any iniquitous measure, to hasten the divine purpose.

We admire the generosity and disinterestedness of this conduct. How far removed from an ambitious or malevolent spirit ! Are we like-minded ? Are not we forward to avenge ourselves, and unwilling to await the slow decisions of Providence ? Or, though we should fear to perpetrate an ignominious action in our own persons, should not we rejoice to gain an advantage by the deceit or cruelty of others ? How rare is it to weep for the unjust oppression of an enemy !

Years before Christ, 1048. The men of Israel had now lost their head, and perceived, probably, their own folly in opposing a prince of God's appointment. They had, likewise, fully proved the wisdom, courage, and integrity of David ; and therefore, without any violence, or threatening, or solicitation on his part, they voluntarily entreated him to take upon him the whole

* 2 Sam. iv. 1, &c.

government, from the consideration of their near relation to him, and the Lord's express designation of him to that office.* Their elders were deputed to settle the business; and with them David entered into a solemn league to administer justice throughout the land. He was then declared to be their king; and not only their numerous armies came to acknowledge their subjection, but all the nation testified their joy upon his accession to the throne.† Thus, after an interval of seven years and a half from the death of Saul, and more than fifteen from his first consecration by the hand of Samuel, at the age of thirty he found himself in the full and undisputed possession of the sovereignty. The situation, doubtless, was the more agreeable, because he was raised by the immediate direction of God, according to His repeated promises, and called to it by the unanimous voice of the people, who eagerly desired him to be their ruler. —In no instance will the Lord finally disappoint those expectations which are grounded on his word. The blessings intended may be delayed, in order to strengthen and to manifest our faith and patience. But, if we are willing to wait, we shall in due time obtain them; and they will be doubly sweet and precious if we can see the hand of God bestowing them, and we ourselves have resolutely refused to pursue any undue measures to procure them.

The same power which placed David in this exalted station supported him in it. Under an almighty protection, he enlarged his dominions, and

* 2 Sam. v. 1, &c.

† 1 Chron. xiii. 23, &c.

increased in fame and dignity. In the midst of his prosperity he was favoured with the gracious presence of his God. "He went on, and grew great, and the Lord God of hosts was with him."—He dispossessed the ancient inhabitants of the city of Jerusalem, where he fixed the seat of government, and erected a palace for the royal residence, from a full confidence that he was established in the kingdom. But there also he multiplied his wives, consulting, we fear, his own sensual inclinations, and following the corrupt practice of the times, rather than regarding the will of God. These connexions, we allow, are not to be justified; and their pernicious effects, as in David's case, form a very strong argument against them.

It was not long before the Philistines, who had lately afforded him an asylum, observing with envy his high advancement, commenced hostilities against him. But, by the express direction and immediate interposition of God, of whom he sought counsel and assistance, he obtained two complete conquests; and his name became formidable to all the surrounding nations.*—The prosperity of the church will generally provoke the opposition of its enemies. But they "imagine a vain thing." What have those to fear, for whom the Lord himself undertakes to fight? Only let them go forth to the conflict in faith and prayer; and He, to whom they commit their cause, will give them wisdom, strength, and victory.

Every accession of wealth and power, as it furnishes the means of greater usefulness, should be vigorously

* 1 Chron. xiv. 17.

improved for the promoting of the public services of religion. In David we behold a bright example of this pious zeal. When he found himself firmly seated on the throne, he was desirous to put an honour upon the ark of God, which had long been neglected, and had lain in obscurity; and, therefore, with a peculiar solemnity, he prepared to conduct this symbol of the divine Presence to Jerusalem, that the ordinances might be celebrated near him.* The king himself, with all the chosen men of his army, attended upon the occasion with demonstrations of reverence and joy. But a sudden damp was cast upon them: the sacred ceremonies were interrupted; and David, being utterly disconcerted, abandoned his scheme, at least for a season. The ark was not carried by the Levites, or according to the prescribed order; and when Uzzah put forth his hand, through presumption or unbelief, to secure it from falling, the righteous displeasure of God instantly struck him dead. The awful event was designed, no doubt, to impress the whole nation with a sense of the holiness and justice of God, and to convince them that every particular of his injunctions must be punctually complied with. And does it not stand as an admonition to us also? Are we conforming ourselves, with the utmost exactness, to the divine will, as far as it is revealed to us? Where are those who dare to trifle with the commands of God, as if they might safely transgress them at their pleasure? Let them look to the example of Uzzah, and tremble for their own danger.

* 2 Sam. vi. 1, &c.

David had been actuated by a very pious principle, but, probably, had undertaken this business with a degree of rashness and pride. When, therefore, he met with so severe a rebuke, he was confounded, and, considering himself as ill treated, was ready to quarrel with God for the tremendous dispensation. Not yet sensible of his own fault, he felt the rising of an angry rebellious spirit against his Judge; and as if he were afraid to have any further concerns with the ark, he left his scheme unfinished, and the whole company was dispersed. Alas! how prone are we to fly from one evil temper to another! How liable either to be lifted up with presumption, or to be cast down in sullen despondency!

After three months David appeared to be convinced of his crime, and determined to resume the plan he had deserted. With great pomp, therefore, as before, but with a more humble and devout disposition, and guarding against his former errors, he went to convey the ark to Jerusalem from the house of Obed-edom, with whom it had remained during the interval, and whom the Lord had blessed for his pious attention to it.* The procession began with holy worship, accompanied with sacrifice, and the king himself was not ashamed to take a leading part in the solemnity. At the head of his people, and as a minister of religion, he conducted the sacred ceremonies, and, by his extraordinary activity, testified the fervour of his zeal, and love, and joy. At length his desire was accomplished; and when the ark of God was fixed in its place, he offered up various

* See 1 Chron. xv. and xvi.

oblations to Heaven with humility and gratitude. As a prophet, no less than a prince, he made intercession for his subjects, and pronounced his benediction upon them.

He had composed for the occasion psalms of praise and thanksgiving to the God of Israel, which he delivered to the persons appointed to officiate in that service: and all the multitude joined in singing those holy songs with loud acclamations. There appeared to be but one heart and one voice throughout the numerous assembly, while they paid their adorations to God, in the most animated forms of devotion. The whole company were also liberally entertained and feasted at their sovereign's expense, before they departed to their respective habitations. And surely they must have departed with the liveliest impressions in favour of religion, after they had beheld in their monarch so eminent a pattern of real and fervent piety towards God; of piety, too, which would seem the more amiable, as being adorned with acts of condescension and munificence towards men.

Nor was David satisfied with directing and assisting the solemnities of that remarkable season; but he then took the opportunity of regulating the divine service for the future, and made provision for the stated celebration of the ordinances, both at Jerusalem, and at Gibeon, where the ancient tabernacle still remained. The constancy, seriousness, and delight, with which he attended at the place of public worship, and the very ardent affections with which he was wont to pour out his soul before God, in the presence of his people,

sufficiently appear from the book of Psalms, and furnish an instructive example to persons of all ranks, from the highest to the lowest.

If we look back to this transaction, wherein he discovered his reverential regard to the ark of God, and his zeal for the advancement of religion, how much may we learn! Do we not recollect that in various instances our good intentions have been defeated, through the mistakes we have made, or the wrong tempers we have indulged? Have we, then, profited by our errors? and are we returned to our duty in a more humble and spiritual frame of mind? For so did the king of Israel. Do we honour the house and ordinances of God, and delight to join in His praises with the great congregation? Do we say from the heart, "How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts!" The time is coming, when not the thousands of Israel only, but all the ransomed of the Lord, "out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation," shall unite in the same triumphant acclamations, and their voices shall be "as the sound of many waters." Let us earnestly desire to bear our part in the songs of that glorious assembly, and rejoice, in the mean season, that we are admitted into the earthly temples of our God, and can there enjoy, with his people, a foretaste of heaven. But are we sensible of the value of our privileges? Ah! what inattention to the sacred ordinances generally prevails! The instituted worship is neglected and despised. As a nation, we are highly favoured with religious opportunities; but such is the contempt of them, that, we fear, God

will be provoked to withdraw them. Surely it becomes every individual, by his example and influence, to recommend a serious and devout regard to the means of grace. How much might be effected by zealous exertions for this purpose, even among those who are not distinguished by rank! But it is a concern which would not disgrace the most exalted monarch: and more extensive good, doubtless, might be accomplished by persons in authority. May it please God to pour out His Spirit upon kings and rulers; so shall we hope to see a revival of His work among their subjects!

“David returned to bless his house,” to perform the offices of domestic religion, to instruct his family, and to present, both with them and for them, the solemn sacrifice of prayer and praise. Those who are engaged in public services should also “learn to show piety at home.” One duty does not supersede another: and real godliness consists very much in giving to different duties their proper place and proportion. The members of our household have a peculiar claim upon us; nor can we possess any true regard for our own souls unless we labour to promote the spiritual welfare of those who are our immediate charge. We shall be unfaithful both to God and man, whatever be our rank in life, if we do not resolve with Joshua, “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

But the most upright and amiable conduct is liable to misconstructions and injurious censures. Nay, we are warned, from the examples of ancient saints, to

expect opposition and contempt, as far as we discover any real fervour in the service of God. Nor should we wonder, if, on such an occasion, "a man's foes be they of his own household." King David was despised and insulted by his wife Michal, who had witnessed his pious ardour in dancing before the ark: and his behaviour was basely misrepresented, as if it were disgraceful to his character. Though these reproaches could not but be very painful, as coming from such a quarter, he gloried in them as most honourable, and determined to be more zealous in the cause of God, to whatever insults it might expose him: "I will yet," said he, "be more vile than thus." How forcibly does this admonish us not to be ashamed or discouraged, when our best actions are calumniated, and the worst motives imputed to us, even by our dearest friends! In such circumstances it may afford us some support to reflect that we are treading in the steps of the most excellent of the earth, and are suffering no other slanders than what they cheerfully submitted to. In the strength of God, then, let us also say, "I will be more vile than thus."

Years before We have observed, that David, though Christ, 1042. elevated to the highest dignity, did not forget his God. It was his first concern to testify his regard for the ark of the covenant, and to institute the ordinances of public worship near to his own palace. Still he was dissatisfied, that, while he enjoyed so much splendour in his own habitation, there was an external meanness about the divine service, as nothing better than a tent had yet been provided for the

reception of the ark.* For the honour of the God of Israel, therefore, he formed the design of erecting a magnificent temple, in which all their religious rites might be commodiously administered. The intention was excellent and acceptable; yet it pleased God to forbid, for the present, the further prosecution of the scheme. Nathan, the Prophet, who had first approved and encouraged the work, was sent with an express message from the Lord, requiring the king to desist from it. David was reminded that the Lord had already distinguished him in a peculiar manner, by raising him to so high a degree of power and reputation in the world. He was assured that his proposal was not rejected in displeasure; that other services of a different kind, and of great importance, were appointed for him; and that a son should be given him, who should succeed to the kingdom in all its glory, and fully execute the plan of building a temple. The most gracious promises were added, to encourage his expectation of the perpetual continuance of the crown in his family, and to direct his attention and his faith to that exalted Personage, who should arise from his seed, with whom the everlasting covenant is established, and “of whose kingdom there shall be no end.”

This declaration of the divine will had its proper effect upon David. He murmured not that his pious intention was defeated, but, under the strongest impressions of gratitude, love, and joy, he poured out his soul before God in admiration, praise, and prayer.

* 2 Sam. vii. 1, &c. 1 Chron. xvii. 1, &c. See also Psal, cxxxiv, 2---5,

Overwhelmed with a sense of what the Lord had done, and still engaged to do for him, he cried out, "Who am I, O Lord God? and what is my house, that thou hast brought me hitherto?" The promise of the blessings designed for him, and for the church through his posterity, appeared too great and excellent to be credited; but, fixing his regard upon the divine word, he could expect them, and ask for them. Encouraged and emboldened by these gracious assurances, he entreated God to fulfil his own purposes of mercy, and to glorify Himself by the establishment of his kingdom throughout all generations.

What a pattern of activity and fervour in religion, of lively faith and hope, attended with the deepest humility! Where are those, in high stations, who are as anxious to provide for the administration of the divine service as for their own private accommodations? Alas! do not they, who "dwell in houses of cedar," despise God's ordinances, and countenance this contempt in others? Few persons, of any rank, care about the ark; but almost all are eager to increase their own splendour and importance.

Have you been defeated in any pious designs which you have formed? Are you not then displeased or envious of others who are called to act for the benefit of the church in preference to you? Yet of this you may be assured, every good principle and intention you have had shall meet the approbation of your Judge. He will say to you, as He did to David, "Thou didst well, that it was in thine heart."*

* 1 Kings viii. 18.

it is possible, that, though truly devoted to God, you may mistake the line of duty and of usefulness, and attempt that for which you are unfit, and in which you are not meant to be employed. Do not overlook or despise the post assigned you. Be thankful that in any way you can promote the interests of religion. Review the steps by which you have been led ; and, when you consider your own unworthiness, and the high favours bestowed upon you, you will be constrained to cry out, in a transport of devout admiration and gratitude, "Who am I, O Lord God ? and what is my house, that thou hast brought me hitherto ?"

You have also, in the Gospel of Christ, "exceeding great and precious promises," by which your God in covenant has bound himself to bless you, even to the end. These will enliven your hopes, and embolden your requests. O, praise the Lord, who has dealt so bountifully with you ! For "He hath brought you to great honour, and comforted you on every side." What thanks, and love, and obedience, are due to Him ! What mercies may you not look for at his hands ! Go, and present your petitions to Him, on the ground of his own declarations. Put Him in remembrance of what he has said ; and, though otherwise you should not have presumed to ask for any favour, plead his solemn engagements, as David, "O, think upon thy servant, as concerning thy word, wherein thou hast caused me to put my trust !"

DAVID.

SECT. IV.

David subdued various enemies—dedicated the spoils to God—administered justice—shewed favour to Mephibosheth—went to war with the Ammonites—sinned with Bath-sheba—contrived Uriah's death—reproved by Nathan—repented—his behaviour on the child's sickness and death—reflections on his fall.

FERVOUR of devotion has sometimes been considered as inconsistent with the active duties of a general or a governor. But we see them united in the very eminent character we are now contemplating. David was ardent in his addresses to God : on some occasions he conducted the religious services of the people, as a prophet and a preacher of righteousness ; and he longed for the opportunities of public worship, as his highest privilege and delight. But he was not thereby unfitted for the vigorous exertions required in a statesman and a soldier. He could preside in the council, direct the movements of a numerous army, and with undaunted courage march forth to the field of battle. In these several employments, also, he displayed very great abilities : yet not to his qualifications, but to the divine blessings, we are taught to ascribe his remarkable successes in war.

Years before Christ, about 1079. He turned his arms against the Philistines, the Moabites, the Syrians, the Edomites, the Ammonites, and the Amalekites, and obtained the most decisive victories over them.* Throughout some of those powerful nations he spread utter desolation; and others were made tributary to him. Such extensive conquests brought immense riches into his treasury, and rendered his name illustrious far and wide. "The Lord preserved him whithersoever he went." He was the Lord's servant, acting under his express commission; and this consideration may justify his treatment of some whom he had subdued, which has, to us, the appearance of wanton cruelty or revenge. He fought the Lord's battles, and executed his righteous vengeance on those guilty states which had been long before devoted to destruction. The stroke of justice may be delayed; but at last it will fall upon the head of the rebellious: and the Almighty Governor, surely, has a right to appoint in what manner they shall be punished.

The power and goodness of God, exerted on the behalf of David, were conspicuous; but we also perceive and admire his faithfulness toward the Israelites. The promise was made to Abraham, "Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates."† This had been, only in part, fulfilled under the command of Joshua. Some of the ancient inhabitants retained a considerable extent of dominion, till the time of Da-

* 2 Sam. viii, 1, &c. 1 Chron. xviii. 1, &c. † Gen. xv, 18,

vid ; for they were spared, amongst other reasons, that they might be a test and a scourge to Israel, as “pricks in their eyes, and thorns in their sides.”* But at last the Lord granted his people the entire possession of the country, according to his word ; and not one of their enemies was able to stand before them.—Thus also He now deals with his spiritual Israel. They are the objects of His care and love ; and he has engaged to bestow upon them an inheritance of unspeakable bliss and glory. But his purpose of mercy is delayed for a season. They are delivered from a state of captivity, and His arm is continually stretched out for their defence. He suffers them, for the present, to be tried by their own corrupt affections, which like the idolatrous inhabitants of Canaan, are not wholly extirpated. The King, however, the true David, who undertakes to be their Leader, will shortly put an end to the conflict by destroying their adversaries for ever ; and in Him the promises of God will be fulfilled, to the everlasting joy and exaltation of his church.

David was not actuated by mercenary or ambitious views in the enlargement of his dominion ; for all the riches he acquired, and the immense spoils which accrued to him, “he dedicated to the Lord,” devoting them entirely to the service of the temple, which yet he was forbidden to build. An increase of power and wealth, too often purchased at the expense of justice and humanity, is generally the means of cherishing pride and sensuality, and thus proves a curse to the community, as well as to the possessors themselves.

* Numb. xxxiii. 55.

But, when obtained in a consistence with the will of God, and improved for the advancement of His cause in the world, it adds a lustre to the owners, and is a public blessing. Learn, then, to “honour the Lord with thy substance, and with the first-fruits of all thine increase.”*

The king of Israel was not inattentive also to the righteous administration of government among his subjects. “He executed judgment and justice unto all his people.” We are thankful, not only for the advantages we enjoy under our civil constitution, but for the excellence of that spiritual kingdom, of which David’s was a type.

We admire the meekness and benevolence of David, in the midst of his prosperity. So far from entertaining any sentiments of revenge against the descendants of Saul, for the injurious treatment he had received from him, he was anxious to discover some remnant of that family, to whom he might show a peculiar favour.† He could not forget the friendship of Jonathan, and the covenant by which they had been bound to each other; and therefore he wished to testify his gratitude and fidelity. After much inquiry, he found out Mephibosheth, a son of that amiable prince, brought him from his concealment, generously bestowed on him the whole paternal estate, which had been forfeited, and constantly admitted him to a place at the royal table. We forbear to comment on this disinterested conduct; but we learn our own obligations to search out those distressed objects, who, on principles of jus-

* Prov. iii. 9.

† 2 Sam. ix. 1, &c.

tice as well as compassion, have a claim to our kindness. What means the selfish man, who consults no one's comfort but his own ; who is unmindful of past favour, or needs to be solicited on behalf of the children of a deceased benefactor ? He is incapable of the fine feelings of friendship ; nor is it likely that he will be influenced even by the solemnity of an oath.

Years before In pursuing the history of David, we find
Christ, about
1036. him involved in a war with the Ammonites, through their insolent and injurious treatment of his ambassadors.* They had grossly insulted him in the persons of his representatives ; and afterwards, apprehending his displeasure, collected numerous forces, and commenced hostilities against him. Joab, who was first sent out against them, with a powerful body, proved victorious ; and then the king himself, at the head of all his troops, took the field, and utterly subdued the Syrians, who were the allies of the enemy.

So far the character of David has appeared in an honourable light ; and here we might wish to close the account. The sequel presents us with a very melancholy story, which tarnishes the lustre of his reputation, and may well excite in us many fears for ourselves. We dare not conceal what God has been pleased to declare ; and we are persuaded that some most instructive lessons are to be learned from this mournful transaction. But we confess that we proceed to the relation with much backwardness, and with a sad apprehension that there are those who will hereby encourage and harden themselves in sin, to their everlast-

* 2 Sam. x. 1, &c.

† Chron. xix. 1, &c.

ing perdition. The infidel and the sensualist indulge a profane triumph upon this occasion; but their scoffs be to themselves! We charge them to keep at a distance; and while we approach to view the grievous fall of the man of God, we tremble, "considering ourselves, lest we also be tempted;" and we are constrained to pray, "Leave us not, neither forsake us, O God of our salvation!"

"With what unwillingness, with what fear," says Bishop Hall, "do I look upon the miscarriage of the man after God's own heart! O, holy prophet, who can promise himself always to stand, when he sees thee fallen, and maimed with the fall? Let profane eyes behold thee contentedly, as a pattern, as an excuse, for sinning: I shall never look upon thee but through tears, as a woful spectacle of human infirmity."

David neglected to prosecute the war against the Ammonites in his own person, but was content to leave the care of it to Joab, and himself continued at Jerusalem.* Had the concerns of government required his presence, there would have been no fault, no danger, in keeping back from the field of battle. But there was an evident remissness in duty. Perhaps he was lifted up by prosperity, had abated much of his attention to religion, and adopted the plan of allowing himself more ease and indulgence. It is therefore remarked, that "in an evening tide he arose from off his bed," and, having addicted himself to sloth, he was the more readily carried away with temptation. As he was walking upon the roof of his house, which

* 2 Sam. xi. 1, &c.

was an usual practice, he beheld a beautiful woman bathing herself, and, through the unrestrained wantonness of his eye, the fire of lust was kindled in his heart. Immediately he formed the scheme of obtaining her: but, upon inquiry, he found her to be another's possession. This, however, was no effectual bar in his way. He had given the rein to his desires, and they were at length too strong to be resisted. He sent to her, solicited her compliance, and prevailed, and thus plunged both himself and her into the horrid guilt of adultery.

We stand in amazement, and ask, "Is this the man who had long maintained such intimate communion with God, and surpassed all others in the fervour of devotion? Where now are those earnest aspirations of his soul after God and His ordinances, which he had so often expressed?" Alas! we perceive in him a striking proof of the desperate wickedness of the human heart. The most holy saint has a tendency in his nature to depart from God, and, upon a suitable occasion offered, is capable of committing the basest sin.—But grievous falls seldom happen suddenly. Those, who have been established in religion, are not at once betrayed into any open enormities of conduct. They are generally drawn from one neglect of duty to another; so that their declension is gradual, and frequently, for a long time, undiscovered. Christians, beware of the very first advance towards any wrong compliance. If you are not diligently attending to your proper work, if you are seeking ease when activity is required, you are at leisure to listen to every

solicitation. Your evil passions are gathering strength, and, in such a situation, you have no ground to expect assistance from above. You give yourselves into the tempter's hands ; and we shall not wonder at any abominations into which you may run. Joseph, in the faithful performance of his office, was preserved, when strongly pressed to the commission of adultery, and therefore replied with abhorrence, " How can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God ! " But David, whilst remiss and slothful, was hurried away by impure desires, to the perpetrating of the most complicated iniquity.

After some time it was found that Bath-sheba had conceived by this adulterous commerce, and therefore that it was likely to become matter of public notoriety. The king, who appears not to have felt any proper compunction for his guilt in the sight of God, was very anxious to prevent his disgrace in the eyes of the world. Instead, then, of confessing and repenting, he attempted by the meanest and most impious artifices to conceal the offence, and was involved in wickedness of a still more heinous kind. Uriah, the husband of Bath-sheba, was a bold and faithful officer in David's army, and had been long absent from his wife, upon the king's service. But, after this transaction, he was sent for to Jerusalem, and was desired to return to his house, that he might be thought the father of the child. The veteran soldier came, but refused the indulgence of his own bed. It was imagined, however, that intemperance might lead him to it ; and accordingly David himself was base enough to intoxi-

cate the man. But even then his purpose failed. At last, having gone so far, he was prepared to go still farther, and determined that Uriah, whose rage he dreaded, should be cut off. Yet, ashamed to appear in so detestable a business, he would not dispatch him with his own hand, or by open violence, but contrived to do it by the treachery of others. At his express command, then, Uriah went back to the camp, was placed in the front of the battle, was deserted, and slain. Thus murder completed what idleness and lust began.

Oh, the deep deceitfulness of sin! One transgression paves the way for another; the second hardens the heart, till a third is readily admitted. Had David been told beforehand what complicated iniquity he was about to run into, he would have recoiled with horror, and would, probably, have said, like Hazael, "But what, is thy servant a dog, that he should do this great thing?"* Alas! how changed! how fallen! But Satan is an artful tempter; and, because it would defeat his own purpose to discover the whole of his design at once, he makes gradual advances, just as far as our compliance may encourage him to proceed. Beware, then, of cherishing any one evil thought; for you know not to what lengths it may carry you, or where the destructive consequences of it may terminate.

Uriah being removed, the king took Bath-sheba to wife; and, perhaps, this was the point he had aimed at. But, though he escaped the resentment of an injured

* 2 Kings viii. 13.

husband, and seemed to be above the penalty of the law, which he had broken, he had incurred the displeasure of Jehovah; and ere long he was brought to "know and see that it was an evil thing and bitter that he had forsaken the Lord his God." We are astonished, indeed, to find that many months elapsed before any contrition was expressed or felt. He had sunk into a deep lethargy; and his conscience, which we might have supposed would have been filled with horror and dismay, was deprived of its sensibility. He might, possibly, continue some external acts of worship, but he had lost all the spirituality, life, and comfort of religion. The Spirit of God was grieved, and departed from him; yet it does not appear that he lamented his state, or once entreated the divine Visitant to return. Here also we discover the extreme depravity of our nature. If left to ourselves, we should not only run from one abomination to another, but willingly persevere in them, and never seriously think of coming back again to God. The exertion of his mighty power is necessary for the recovery of a backslider, as much as for the first conversion of a sinner.

The Prophet Nathan was sent by revelation to awaken, to convict, and to reprove the king.* With great wisdom and prudence he addressed himself to this exalted criminal, representing in a feigned character the baseness of his conduct, and making him the judge of his own cause. When David, not perceiving the drift of the parable, had condemned the supposed offender,

* 2 Sam. xii, 1, &c.

and, in effect, passed sentence upon himself, Nathan immediately urged the application, and with singular majesty and courage, as the messenger of Heaven, cried out, "Thou art the man," and proceeded to state before him the horrid nature and peculiar aggravations of his sin. He denounced the displeasure of God against him ; and declared that, in consequence thereof, he should feel the miseries of war to the end of life, and experience inconceivable distresses from his own family. The reproof was bold and pointed, and the threatenings awful and most affecting. When our duty calls us to so painful and difficult an office as Nathan's was, may we possess the like wisdom, firmness, and fidelity ! And should not the recovery of a backslider be attempted ? "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye, which are spiritual, restore such an one."* A prudent regard should be had to his state and circumstances ; but surely we should aim to rouse his conscience, by a faithful representation of his heinous guilt, and of its terrible effects. The event of such an address must be left with God, who alone can render it successful.

What, then, was the impression upon the mind of the royal culprit ? He was instantly awakened from his slumber, confounded, and humbled in the dust. Full of anguish and horror, of shame and self-abhorrence, feeling more than any words could utter, he gave vent to the distresses of his heart by this short but frank confession, "I have sinned against the Lord." He

* Gal. vi. 1.

did not offer the least excuse, or plead any thing in extenuation of his offence, and probably dared not to hope, during his first pangs of grief, that there could be forgiveness for such aggravated wickedness. A hypocrite, indeed, may adopt the same language, and acknowledge his crime; for so did Saul: but the Lord discerns an essential difference between the two characters. The dissembler may be terrified with apprehensions of his danger; but the real penitent possesses an utter detestation of himself, and can justify God in his everlasting condemnation.

While David was thus overwhelmed with a sense of his own baseness, perhaps expecting to be suddenly destroyed for his iniquity, the Lord, who was privy to the inward contrition of his soul, commanded the Prophet to comfort him, that he might not be "swallowed up with over-much sorrow." Nathan, therefore, instantly replied, "The Lord hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die." Yet, though the stroke of divine justice was averted from the king, and he was spared to be a monument of mercy, it was declared, that, on account of that reproach which he had brought upon religion, the child, which was the fruit of his adulterous connexion, should be surely cut off.

The fears of his own destruction were quieted; but he felt the chastisement most painful to him, while he beheld the infant sickening and expiring for his transgression. He mourned, he fasted, he prayed; testifying his own humiliation, and indulging a hope that the disease might still be removed through the

forbearance of God. But, upon the death of the child, he gave thanks, and rejoiced in the prospect of meeting it in a better world. His conduct upon this occasion affords us an instructive example. In our deepest distresses, even in those which our own crimes have produced, we should be encouraged to offer up the most importunate supplications; for "who can tell whether God will be gracious to us?" And though He take from us what we desire to retain, we should cheerfully submit, and love and praise Him.

Do you ask for a clearer evidence of David's repentance? The sequel of the history will prove it. Or do you wish to know the state of his mind upon the review of his late awful miscarriage? Many of his psalms describe his feelings; and, as being designed for public worship, they were an open testimony of his sincere contrition. Probably, soon after Nathan's departure from him, he retired, and breathed out his distresses before God in the penitential language of the fifty-first Psalm, which was composed for this mournful occasion. There we behold the king prostrate in the dust, dissolved in tears, and pleading for the life of his soul. With unutterable anguish he looked back on what he had done, and perceived the dreadful consequences and heinous nature of his sin. He saw the dishonour brought upon religion, the righteous grieved, the wicked triumphing, the Spirit of God deserting him, and depriving him of those lively hopes and comforts he had once enjoyed. He had betrayed his

trust ; he had committed an irreparable injury to society ; but he had also despised the authority and glory of the great Jehovah ; and this consideration, above all others, filled his conscience with horror. Yet he did not therefore sorrow “ as those who have no hope.” He was “ perplexed, but not in despair ; cast down, but not destroyed ;” and, through the divine promises of mercy, he indulged the pleasing expectation that his backsliding would be healed, that he should live to admonish sinners from his own example, and see the cause of God flourish around him.

What an astonishing history is here ! Whether of the two appears the most wonderful, the patience of God, or the depth of iniquity in man ? Do you ask, “ Why was not David recovered sooner ?” Rather consider the desperate wickedness of the human heart, and admire the sovereign grace of God in recovering him at all. Doubtless he would have slept on in his spiritual stupor, had not God, in remembrance of his holy covenant, interposed for his restoration.— But do you inquire, “ Why was not the whole of this shameless transaction prevented ?” We allow that it might have been ordered otherwise ; and you think that it would have been every way better. But do you charge the great Governor with want of foresight, or mismanagement ? Leave to him the securing of his own glory, and believe it to be his prerogative to bring much good out of evil. Let it suffice us that He permitted it to take place ; and, since He has re-

corded it for our benefit, be it our concern to profit from it. Away with the sneering infidel, who treats all sanctity as a mere pretence ! Away with the unsound professor of religion, who is hereby encouraged to persist, and harden himself in his wickedness ! These persons, who read the Bible only to find out excuses for their ungodliness, exult in the fall of so eminent a saint ; and what a holy man once committed they do not hesitate continually to practise. Would you justify your enormities from David's example ? How preposterous is this ! O, consider that he abhorred his iniquity, and dared not to defend it, as you do. The very recollection of it occasioned him the most pungent distress, even to the last. What will it avail you that David once sinned like you, unless you be restored to repentance and obedience, as he was ? While you are strangers to godly sorrow, and remain careless and impenitent, whatever you may plead of the stability of the covenant, and the perseverance of the saints, we cannot address you otherwise than as the enemies of God, under the curse of his law, and exposed to his fiery indignation for ever. O, turn to Him with weeping and with supplication ; for " why will ye die ? " Let there be joy in heaven over repenting sinners upon earth.

We learn indeed, from the instance before us, not rashly to give up those who have departed from their religious professions. Their case is most awful ; but we cease to wonder, and we are able to suggest some encouragement, while we are studying these

sacred records. We are distressed, and almost confounded, when we observe any, who have zealously maintained the cause of God, and “seemed to be pillars” of his church, disgrace their character, and violate their most solemn engagements. But would you, on this account, reproach the truth of God, which they embraced and defended? Surely your censures are unjust. The principles of the Gospel, though some desert them, are not therefore less certain, or less excellent; and, though in many instances they may appear to have failed of their effect, their tendency is to produce a holy practice. We do not, then, vindicate the wrong conduct of those who have been reputed pious; but we severely condemn it, and warn them not to deceive their own souls, or presumptuously rest on their former high estimation among men. Do you ask what we conclude respecting their state? We answer, that we stand in doubt of them. Perhaps they have been unsound throughout; but we would rather say, Wait awhile, and the event will declare it. Their past professions might be sincere, though their present declension be very grievous, and of long continuance; and, by the rich grace of our God, they may yet be effectually recovered, and all their backslidings healed.

Surely the proud thought will not arise in any of our minds, “I am incapable of committing such open and gross enormities.”—“Consider thyself, lest thou also be tempted.” You know not that your “heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked,”

if you presume on your own strength. Look at the man after God's own heart, and be aware of danger. What security have you which he had not? But his fall may be the means of preserving you, while you are taught by it to walk humbly, not only under a sense of your continual defects in duty, but through a fear of dishonouring your profession by scandalous immoralities. You will, therefore, be circumspect in all things, and redouble your importunity in prayer, saying with David, "Keep back thy servant from presumptuous sins."* Thus will you be prepared to resist temptation, while you distrust yourselves, and seek help from God.

But have you departed from the good ways of God, after having been established in them? Your case indeed is most melancholy; and, if you are sincere, you will probably see the aggravations of your wickedness in a stronger light than any other persons can represent. You are ready to conclude, then, "There is no hope," But the instance before us will forbid you to despair. David's declension was, at least, as base as yours; yet he was pardoned and restored. He bespeaks your attention, while he sings aloud of the righteousness of God, by which an access to the throne of his mercy is provided for you.† O, return unto him from whom you have deeply revolted! There is a sacrifice which hath virtue sufficient to expiate all your accumulated guilt. By the application of the blood of Jesus, you

* Psal. xix. 13.

† Psal. li. 13, 14.

shall obtain peace with God, and strength to serve Him; nor is there any other method by which you can be established in comfort and holiness again.

“Then,” says the presumptuous offender, “there is nothing to be dreaded in the commission of sin, as it may be so easily pardoned. I will venture to transgress; and, after all, my state will be as good, at least as safe, as that of the most exemplary saints. I shall repent, and be forgiven.”

It will be surprising if you be not deceived in your expectations. Are you sure that you shall have grace to repent? Is God bound to bestow it? Or, is it a matter of no concern to you, provided you can escape eternal punishment, that you have so long despised God, dishonoured His name, and grieved His Spirit? And, though you should be delivered from the wrath to come, have you no fears of present calamities? It is not true that because iniquity is pardoned, and the sentence of everlasting condemnation cancelled, no bad consequences are to be dreaded. It will afterward appear, from David's case, that, even where reconciliation is obtained, the Lord “will visit the transgression of his people with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes.” Repentance and forgiveness by no means avert the horrible effects of sin in this life. For one momentary gratification of a vile lust, David had many days and years of extreme distress.

Let us pray that we may not prove, by our own melancholy experience, the truth of that des-

nunciation, "The backslider in heart shall be filled with his own ways."*

"Now, unto Him that is able to keep us from falling, and to present us faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever!" Amen.

* Prov. xiv. 14.

D A V I D.

SECT. V.

David subdued the Ammonites—distressed by the wickedness of his sons, Amnon and Absalom—fled from Jerusalem, on account of Absalom's conspiracy—cursed by Shimei—sent out an army to oppose Absalom—grieved for his death—recalled to the government—rebelled against by Sheba—slew seven of Saul's descendants—numbered his subjects—punished by a pestilence—prayed and prevailed for Jerusalem—prepared for the building of the temple.

THE extreme depravity of human nature has appeared in the declension of David ; and we have seen the grace of God displayed in his pardon and recovery. He had incurred the divine displeasure ; but reconciliation was obtained, and, as a token of renewed favour, a son was born to him, named, “ The beloved of the Lord,” to whom the promises were made.* In the midst of judgment, the Lord remembers mercy.

The protection of Providence also was continued to David, notwithstanding his late shameful misconduct. His armies proved victorious, and terminated the war against the Ammonites in a successful manner. He himself attended at the reduction of the royal city, in order to share the triumph, and adorned his own

* 2 Sam. xii. 24, &c.

head with the crown of the conquered monarch. The inhabitants were plundered, and placed in a state of lowest servitude, if not destroyed by a miserable death. "He brought forth the people that were therein, and put them under saws, and under harrows of iron, and made them pass through the brick-kiln."—This treatment of his enemies has been rigorously censured, as an exercise of the most wanton barbarity. But it has been alleged in his defence, that the original words imply only, he condemned them to certain servile employments at the saw, the iron-mines, and the brick-kiln.* Or, if uncommon severities were practised, who shall say that there was not a sufficient reason? Perhaps the very punishments inflicted upon these prisoners of war had been inflicted by their nation upon the Hebrews and others, and therefore, by the judgment of God, might be appointed for them in return.† If David acted, as it is probable, by a divine commission, shall we undertake to blame the proceeding? The Judge of all the earth will surely do right. But, be the case as it may, the sentence executed upon the Ammonites cannot be pleaded as a precedent for cruelty, either in private or public concerns; nor will it justify any who are seeking the destruction of their enemies, from motives of pride or revenge.

Years before Christ, about 1032. It was not long before David began to reap the bitter fruits of his fall, and experienced the truth of those awful denunciations which Nathan had pronounced. "Evil was raised up against

* See Chandler's *Life of David*, and *Letters on Infidelity*,

† See the case of Adoni-bezek, *Judg. i. 6, 7.*

him out of his own house." The bad effects of his numerous marriages appeared in many instances. The education of his children was neglected, and their perverse tempers were indulged. Probably, in consequence of his late offence, notwithstanding his former example and instructions, they were inclined to think more favourably of sin, and to gratify their sensual passions. This very circumstance must have been an additional distress to his mind, when he saw them hardened through his misconduct. Alas! we know not how far the mischief of one crime may extend.

He was wounded in a very tender part when he was informed that his daughter Tamar had been ravished by her own brother Amnon.* But how did his anguish increase, when Amnon, though he had deserved to die, was treacherously killed by another of his children, and that, too, by his favourite son Absalom! Thus he beheld lewdness and murder introducing the most horrid confusion into his family; and how could he proceed to punish those actions, which were an imitation of his own?

Absalom had fled, "and David mourned for him every day." We fear that the fond father, who had been highly blameable for his former indulgence of him, did not then testify, as he ought, his abhorrence of the sin which had been committed. Indeed, the life of the offender was forfeited to public justice. The king was wrong in not executing the sentence of the law; and therefore God took the matter into his own

* 2 Sam. xiii.

hand. Let parents learn from this instance, as well as from Eli, not to "honour their sons more than God."

David longed for Absalom's return, and very readily consented to his recall: yet, to humble the criminal, and to fix a mark of infamy upon him, he refused to admit him into his presence for two years.* Even then he was too hasty in receiving him to favour, since the young man discovered no signs of contrition, but evidently appeared insolent and overbearing. Soon afterward the bad effects of the father's foolish tenderness were felt, not by himself only, but throughout the land. We deplore the lenity of many pious persons, who, through an unwillingness to punish their perverse children, are bringing misery upon themselves and their families. They are likely to see the dear objects of their affection run headlong to destruction, and to be repaid for their indulgence, not with their blessing but their curses.

Years before Absalom, by his flattering speeches, stole away the hearts of the king's subjects, and raised so formidable a conspiracy against him, that David thought himself unsafe at Jerusalem, and therefore, together with his household and faithful attendants, fled from his rebellious son.† This was a most painful trial indeed; and yet it seems to have been of a salutary nature. We cannot but admire his entire resignation to the will of God under this severe chastisement. He remembered his own guilt and the sentence passed upon him, and was silent. His conduct may have the appearance of cowardice or unbelief; but we

* 2 Sam. xiv.

† 2 Sam. xv.

are taught to ascribe it to better principles. He "humbled himself under the mighty hand of God," ready to submit to his stroke, whatever it might be. On this ground, he would not suffer the ark and the priests to accompany him, though they would have been a comfort to him in his exile; for, considering, himself under the rebuke of God, and therefore unworthy of the outward tokens of His presence, he sent them again to Jerusalem. "Carry back," said he "the ark of God into the city: if I shall find favour in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me again, and shew me both it and his habitation. But if he thus say, I have no delight in thee; behold here am I, let him do to me what seemeth good unto him." And then the king pursued his journey with all the marks of pious and penitential sorrow. "He went up by the ascent of mount Olivet, and wept as he went up, and had his head covered, and he went bare-foot: and all the people that were with him covered every man his head, and they went up, weeping as they went up."

On every occasion it becomes a sinner to be abased before his God, and to acknowledge the justice of His corrections. But you, whose declensions from a religious profession have emboldened others to speak reproachfully, should, in an especial manner, take shame to yourselves, and bow with deepest contrition of heart before Him, whose name you have dishonoured. Through his abundant mercy, indeed, you may hope to be restored, and again "find favour in the eyes of the Lord." But, if He should deprive you of your

former privileges, and thrust you down from your distinguished place in his church, and determine never more to make use of you as he has done; still say, "Behold, here am I, let him do to me as seemeth good unto him." Such was David's unfeigned submission: and Eli, as we have seen, replied to the divine rebuke with the same temper of mind, "It is the Lord; let Him do what seemeth him good."

It is no objection to his piety, but rather a strong mark of it, that, when he heard of Ahithophel's treachery against him, he prayed God to turn the counsel of that wicked conspirator into foolishness. He referred his cause to the righteous decision of the Judge of all, and soon obtained redress. Nor was it wrong to desire Hushai to continue at Jerusalem, for the purpose of sending him information, and promoting his interest there: but his instructions to that officer seem inconsistent with the openness of truth and probity. Religion does not forbid any prudent precautions, though it allows not of fraud or perfidy, for the averting of impending dangers.

In the progress of his flight, fresh trials awaited him. Shimei, a descendant of Saul, who, perhaps, had been disappointed in his expectations of advancement, came out with impious rage to insult the king, and, casting stones at him, poured forth the most dreadful imprecations against him.* It would have been easy for David to have crushed this weak, though furious adversary, in a moment; and he was urged to it by his attendants. But he repressed their zeal in

* 2 Sam. xvi. 5, &c.

his cause, and with a singular meekness of spirit, determined to bear the reproaches and the violence of the wretch, from a sense of his own evil desert. He looked beyond the wickedness of the man, to the righteous displeasure of God, who thus suffered his enemies to rise against him. He patiently submitted, therefore, to the divine correction, and expected redress from Heaven, saying, "Let him alone, and let him curse, for the Lord hath bidden him: it may be, that the Lord will look upon mine affliction, and that the Lord will requite me good for his cursing this day."

Such forbearance will probably be condemned as meanness; but herein we perceive and admire the indubitable marks of a real penitent. The sorrow that "worketh repentance to salvation," while it bows down the soul before God, and stops the mouth from complaining of the heaviest punishment, produces also gentleness and long-suffering towards men; it is the parent of that charity, which "is not easily provoked, and endureth all things." How different from the haughtiness of temper so much applauded in the world, which is implacable and cruel, and takes fire at every trifling affront! But, for a perfect pattern of meekness and forgiveness, we look higher than to David, even to his exalted Son, "who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not, but committed himself to Him that judgeth righteously." He endured the scoffs, and curses, and violence of the people, and prayed and died for his very murderers. May "this mind be in us, which was also in Christ Jesus!"

Upon David's flight from Jerusalem, Absalom, having gained possession of the city and the palace, proceeded to the commission of the basest wickedness in defiling his father's concubines; thus executing the divine threatening,* and yet enhancing his own guilt. The king himself narrowly escaped destruction, through Hushai's influence; but as an attack was meditated upon him by a very powerful army, he was obliged to pass over Jordan with great precipitation.† His dominion appeared to be lost, and his life was in the most imminent danger, from hunger and weariness, as well as from the sword of the proud usurper. But the faithfulness of his God preserved him, and raised him friends to support him. Nor can that gracious promise ever fail, "They, that seek the Lord, shall not want any good thing."‡

At length it became necessary to make a stand against his rebellious son, who pursued him with hostile rage: and very soon a numerous body was collected, and sent out to oppose him.§ David himself prepared for the battle; but the earnest entreaties of his people, who strongly represented to him the miseries which his death might occasion, prevented him from taking the field. He consented, then, to remain behind in Mahanaim, waiting with great anxiety the event of an engagement; and, from his extreme affection for his obdurate child, he seems scarcely to have wished for success. He was blameable, doubtless, in his parental fondness; yet he exhibited a beautiful example of kindness and forgiveness to an enemy, when

* 2 Sam. xii. 11. † 2 Sam. xvii. ‡ Psal. xxxiv. 10.

§ 2 Sam. xviii. 1, &c.

he charged the leaders of his forces, "Deal gently for my sake with the young man, even with Absalom."

He sat between the gates of the city, looking with the utmost solicitude towards the scene of action: and, when one messenger after another arrived with the tidings of a complete victory, his sole inquiry was, "Is the young man Absalom safe?" Being informed that the poor unhappy youth had been cut off, he was inconsolable for the loss. "He was much moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom! my son, my son Absalom! would God I had died for thee, O Absalom, my son, my son!" It may be allowed that the extravagant sorrow which the king expressed was highly wrong. He forgot to be thankful for the deliverance vouchsafed to himself and the nation, and, instead of bowing with submission to the wise and righteous decision of the Lord, he seems to have been carried away by his passion. Yet you, who are tried in the perverseness and disobedience of your children, will not wonder, or be forward to censure him. You dread the thought of their being suddenly taken away in impenitence more than any temporal calamities which can happen to yourselves: and therefore, that they may have further opportunities of turning to God, and be saved from everlasting perdition, you would wish to die a thousand deaths in their stead. Would you, then, avoid the anguish which David felt, look well to the state of your affections even toward your beloved offspring; and beware, lest you pave the way to their ruin, both here and for ever,

by an inordinate attachment to them, or improper indulgence of them. Yet, should you live to see them cut off by the just judgment of God, though your affliction will be unspeakably great, it will become you to repress your grief, and, while you acknowledge the righteousness of God, to be silent in the dust before Him: for "who art thou that repliest against Him?" In your own preservation, and the hopes of forgiveness still afforded you, you may perceive abundant cause for gratitude. O, praise the Lord, that, though one be taken, another is left; and say, "It is of His mercies that we are not consumed."

The excessive lamentations of David were also impolitic, and might have been fatal to his interest. The very men who had fought and conquered for him were on the point of deserting him, when they received no thanks for their services, and observed that the defeat of the rebel army was bewailed as the heaviest calamity.* Upon the representation of Joab, however, the king dried up his tears, and, by his public appearance again, conciliated the affections of his subjects. It is necessary, in every line of life, to consider what effect our behaviour may produce upon the minds of others; or else our imprudence may cause irreparable mischief. Nor should we be unwilling to listen to the reproof of an inferior, though conveyed to us in a rough manner.

David was not precipitate in returning to the exercise of government, for he waited to be assured of the good dispositions of the people toward him. In a little

* 2 Sam. xix. 1, &c.

time he was recalled by the general voice, and conducted back over Jordan, with numerous attendants, and with all the marks of national honour and esteem, Yet, even in the hour of his triumph, we behold a singular degree of meekness and moderation. Shimei, the profane Benjamite, who had lately treated him with the utmost indignity and contempt, came with professions of penitence to entreat his forgiveness. The offence was heinous, and David was urged to make him an example of justice : but he forbore, declaring that his authority was so perfectly re-established, it could not be necessary to put any man to death ; and on this ground he suffered Shimei to escape with impunity. Do not our hearts advise, like the sons of Zeruah, to take vengeance of an enemy? Let us not forget the Christian precept, " Be not overcome of evil ; but overcome evil with good."*

Mephibosheth, the son of Jonathan, came also to offer his congratulations on the king's return. David had conceived of him as a conspirator, from the slanderous accusations of Ziba;† but, being now satisfied of his loyalty, he admitted him again to favour. It requires no little care to guard against the false and malicious insinuations of tale-bearers, and no little candour to correct our mistakes.

We are pleased likewise to observe the affection and gratitude of David towards the aged Barzillai, who, with an unshaken attachment, and amazing liberality, had supported him in the time of his distress. Upon their parting from each other, the king kissed

* Rom. xii. 21,

† 2 Sam. xvi. 1--4,

and blessed him, and took his son with him, to promote him to some considerable honour. It is but justice to recompence a benefit received. But, alas! does not prosperity so intoxicate the mind, that past kindnesses are generally forgotten? Does not a proud and supercilious behaviour too commonly characterize those who possess any large measure of riches and power? We should therefore venerate the man, who, in the midst of success, preserves an humble grateful disposition; and, through a diffidence of ourselves, we should watch and pray against temptation, "in all time of our wealth."

The joy which accompanied David's restoration was interrupted by certain jealousies and debates between the tribes of Israel and that of Judah. There were even then divisions, which afterward occasioned their total separation. Both sides were desirous of notice and precedency, and neither of them willing to make proper concessions. How seldom is it that the most favourable events are not attended with some circumstances which damp our pleasure! And what dreadful mischiefs proceed from ambition, strife, and envy!

Sheba, who was a forward and seditious woman, seized the opportunity of blowing up the flames of discord between the contending parties, and excited another formidable rebellion.* The Israelites, who had professed great zeal for their prince, took up arms against him; but they were soon recovered to their allegiance, and the insurrection was crushed. What a mercy

* 2 Sam. xx. 1, &c.

it is that God preserves, or restores, the peace of society ! If the passions of men were let loose, the utmost confusion and misery must ensue.

Years before David was called to a difficulty of another kind ; for he saw his subjects suffering under the pressure of a grievous famine, during three successive years. The Lord God, to whom he sought for direction and relief, intimated to him that Saul's oppression of the Gibeonites, in violation of the public faith, had brought down this national judgment upon them.* To make the necessary expiation, David yielded to the demand of the Gibeonites ; and accordingly seven of Saul's descendants fell as a sacrifice to justice.—Whatever opinion we may form of the transaction, we must, at least, acquit David of malice or resentment against that unhappy family : the execution of the sentence, probably, was very afflictive to him. Instead of charging him with inhumanity in this proceeding, let us stand and adore the righteousness of God, who required it. The day is coming in which the equity of his decisions will be fully revealed. For the present we are assured that his punishments descend only upon the head of the guilty ; and he has taught us, in this instance, to beware of sin, lest we leave an inheritance of wrath and misery to our children.

David continued to reign and prosper. The Philistines, indeed, ceased not to harass him as they could ; but their various assaults afforded so many proofs of his martial abilities, or rather, of the Lord's

* 2 Sam. xxi. 1, &c.

faithfulness and love to him. On the review of all those signal deliverances, which his God had wrought for him, he felt and confessed his obligations, and celebrated the divine goodness in the most elevated strains of devotion: he rejoiced also in the prospect of the much higher advancement of One glorious Personage among his posterity, and of the happiness of the church under His government.* Let us study those hymns of praise, till our hearts burn within us. Surely the expressions of his gratitude and zeal will reproach us for our insensibility. How great things has the Lord done for us! He has raised up Messiah from the seed of David; and we participate the benefits of His administration. Yet what poor tributes of thankfulness he has received from our hands! O, may the Spirit of his grace, which rested in so large a measure upon David, implant all holy affections in us, and ever preserve them in a lively and vigorous state!

Years before Christ, 1017. It is apprehended that the prosperity which David and his people enjoyed proved a snare to them. Do not riches and power tend to corrupt the mind, introduce luxury, and give rise to ambitious projects? Probably some neglect of religious duties had taken place, and some sinful practices been allowed. They had not profited, as they should have done, from the late visitations of war and famine: and “again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel.”† The heart of the king, perhaps, was elated with his successes, and with the very flourishing

* 2 Sam. xxii. 1, &c. † xxiv. 1, &c. 1 Chron. xxi. 1, &c.

condition of his subjects. Satan, who watched the opportunity, suggested a scheme for the gratification of his pride, and tempted him to number Israel ; insinuating, it might be, that no prince possessed larger dominions, or commanded more numerous forces, than he. Ah ! what need we have to be upon our guard against the subtle devices of our grand adversary ; for he knows the temper of our minds, and generally gains an advantage by suiting his proposals to our wishes ! And how feeble are the strongest believers, when left to his influence !

In one account of this transaction it is ascribed to God, and in another to Satan. But the solution is easy. Throughout the Scriptures, the Lord is said to do that which He permits to be done. The sins of men are therefore sometimes represented as proceeding from Him, when, for special purposes, He withdraws whatever might tend to hinder the execution of their wicked projects, and overrules the event for the accomplishment of his own designs. It is not possible that He can infuse into the minds of his creatures any wrong thought or inclination : but, consistently with his righteous perfections, He may cease to restrain the corrupt desires of our hearts, and may suffer them to have their full effect. In this very way he carries on his government over our rebellious world, so that even the most iniquitous actions form a part of His plan : and yet He continues holy, and just, and good. He might have prevented the secret ambition of David from breaking forth into any outward act, or defeated the stratagems of Satan ; but He permitted the scheme

to proceed, in order that the king might be more deeply sensible of the evil of his nature, and that, through his perverseness, the people also might be punished for their multiplied offences.

David, therefore, commissioned Joab to take an exact account of the number of his subjects. Whatever might be his motive, whether to indulge a proud curiosity, and to glory in his strength, or to enrol them for his army,* there was something in it so manifestly wrong, and inconsistent with his character, that even Joab remarked it, and earnestly remonstrated against it; for "the king's word was abominable to him." But, as the Lord had determined to leave him, in this instance, to his own devices, and the machinations of Satan, the prince obstinately persisted in his scheme. At length, however, his conscience being roused, he was ashamed and humbled for the folly and wickedness of his heart: he felt and confessed his guilt, and importunately deprecated the divine wrath. Here, then, we behold him in a most distressed situation; we perceive, from his example, the great evil of sin and learn to walk circumspectly in all things.

The Prophet Gad went to him, by revelation, to declare Jehovah's displeasure and determination to punish him; at the same time referring it to his choice whether he and his people should suffer by famine, by war, or pestilence. The proposal was afflictive in every view: but, as the pestilence must proceed immediately from the hand of God, and the king himself could no more be secured from it than the

* See Bishop Lowth's notes on Isa. iv. 3.

meanest of his subjects, this was preferred. The utmost meekness, submission, and faith, are observable in David's answer, "I am in a great strait : let us fall now into the hand of the Lord (for his mercies are great), and let me not fall into the hand of man."—The sin, doubtless, was forgiven : but, as it had been of a public nature, the Lord would manifest his abhorrence of it before all the nation. Commissioned by him, therefore, the plague instantly went forth, and destroyed in the different parts of the land SEVENTY THOUSAND MEN.

The judgment was adapted to the offence. David had been elated with the number of his people ; and, to cure him of his foolish pride, the Lord effectually convinced him how soon they might be reduced. He can never be at a loss for means to punish his rebellious creatures : in general, too, He is pleased to suit his corrections to their crimes ; and accordingly nothing is more common with Him than to take away, or im bitter to us, the object which we value too highly.

Does the chastisement, in the present instance, seem severe ? We are unfit judges of the measures of God's government : we cannot estimate the evil of any particular action. In some way or another guilt had been contracted, according to the Lord's declaration and David's own confession ; and if only an ambitious thought had been indulged, who shall presume to say that the most rigorous inflictions would have been unmerited ? For "the wages of sin is death." On other occasions the conduct of the king of Israel has

met with unsparing censures, and many have wondered how such complicated iniquity could possibly be forgiven : but here Infidelity changes her mode of attack ; the offence is considered either as nothing, or very trivial ; and a surprise is expressed at the cruelty of the Judge. In both cases the objection lies against God : but He will shortly appear, to vindicate his own proceedings.

The whole transaction is a solemn admonition to us to take good heed to ourselves. Long experience and high attainments in religion will afford us no security from temptation, or from the dreadful consequences of complying with it. We have especial need to beware of pride ; for this will assault us in various shapes even to the last. And if we are betrayed into any dishonourable conduct, we shall probably feel the chastening rod, and smart for our folly.

The people, we have seen, were involved in the sad effects of the transgression of their leader. And such is the connexion which subsists between the different members of society, like that in the natural body, that, if one member suffer, some others must necessarily suffer with it : in particular, what happens to the head must affect all the parts of the system. Is it inquired how this is to be reconciled with justice, that thousands should be afflicted for the guilt of one ? The answer in the present case is obvious ; no wrong was done them ; for they were evidently punished for their own iniquity, though the offence of David was the immediate occasion of that desolating judgment. The Lord God, in order to chastise a sinful nation, very

frequently turns the counsels of their rulers into foolishness.

An Angel, it should seem, was employed as an instrument of the divine vengeance. And how astonishing is the strength and activity of these spiritual beings, since one of them could in a few hours spread destruction through the land! At last this minister of wrath became visible to David and his elders, who were clothed in sackcloth: and how terrible the form, how threatening the aspect! "He stood between the earth and the heaven, having a drawn sword in his hand, stretched out over Jerusalem," and it appeared as if his commission extended to the utter desolation of that populous city. Then the royal penitent prostrated himself in the dust, full of anguish upon the recollection of his offence; and while he pleaded for the life of his people, he offered himself to the stroke of the devouring sword, that it might be averted from them. "Lo," said he, "I have sinned, and I have done wickedly: but these sheep, what have they done? Let thine hand, I pray thee, be against me, and against my father's house."

The cry which proceeds from a truly contrite heart has power to pierce the heavens. The Lord God looked down with pity upon his supplicating servant, reversed the mandate that was gone forth, and spared Jerusalem at his request. He said to the destroying Angel, "It is enough: stay now thine hand." Directions were then given to David to erect an altar upon that very spot, as a memorial of the awful transaction, and of the gracious deliverance vouchsafed.

The obedient prince hastened to fulfil the command, immediately purchased the ground, reared an altar, and worshipped the Lord with costly sacrifices. Thus reconciliation was effected, and the favour of God manifested in answer to prayer.

In the very place which had been so highly honoured, David continued to offer up his stated services: and there also he appointed, doubtless by revelation, that the temple should be built.* We are struck with admiration at the zeal of this pious king, and his preparations for the erection of that magnificent edifice, which he himself was forbidden to undertake. Materials of every sort were laid up in readiness, with amazing pains and expense; though he knew that they could not be made use of till after his decease. He instructed, he charged, he encouraged Solomon his son to enter upon the work, and to persevere in it with firmness, till the whole should be finished. He commanded the nobles also to contribute their utmost influence for the completing of this important business, which he pressed upon them from a regard to the glory of God, and an assured confidence of His gracious presence and assistance.

From this view of the history, we cannot be at a loss to ascertain the true character of David. We allow that he did not adhere to the rules of righteousness without imperfection or deviation; but we perceive, upon the whole, an integrity and an excellency in his life which stamp an honour upon his name. In the instance we have last considered, what clear marks

* Deut. xii. 5. 1 Chron. xxii. 1, &c.

of penitence and fervent piety meet us ! Let us judge ourselves by them. WE also have sinned in various ways ; and, perhaps, many in our families or connexions are suffering in consequence of our perverseness or imprudence. Do we mourn before God on this account ? Do we cry to him for pardoning mercy ? Are we more ready to condemn ourselves than others ? Are we willing and desirous that the effects of our folly may fall entirely upon ourselves, rather than that any who have deserved better at our hands should be involved in misery by our means ? Let us beware, lest, while we are censuring David, we continue impenitent, and perish in our sins. Hear the voice of God, “ Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions ; so iniquity shall not be your ruin.”*

The justice of God in taking vengeance has been awfully displayed before us. But do we not learn also that “ He pardoneth iniquity, and passeth by the transgression of the remnant of his heritage ; that He retaineth not his anger for ever, because He delighteth in mercy ?”† We cannot have a stronger proof of the efficacy of prayer and intercession, on the behalf of others, than we have seen in David’s mediation for Jerusalem. O, let us be encouraged to cry earnestly to God for our own nation, corrupt and abandoned as it is ! We have contributed to the general mass of guilt : why are we so unconcerned about the consequence ? O, let us lie in the dust, and cease not to lift up our hands with importunate petitions !

Has deliverance been granted ? Has the destroying

* Ezek. xviii. 30.

† Mic. vii. 18.

Angel sheathed his sword! Then why is not the gracious interposition acknowledged? Are sacrifices of praise offered to God on this account? Do we, with overflowing gratitude, record His mercies? What altar have we erected? or what oblations have we presented to Him? Are we glad to bear our part in advancing the good work of God, though we shall not live to see it completed? Alas! how many are discouraged! How many are careless and indolent! How many are worldly and covetous! The difficulty and the expense of this or the other undertaking for the glory of God are common and prevailing objections; so that there are few, indeed, who will assist in any way to build the temple of the Lord. O for the same Spirit which actuated David to be poured out upon this generation! "O Lord, revive thy work in the midst of the years!"*

* Hab. iii. 2.

D A V I D.

SECT. VI.

David married Abishag—appointed Solomon his successor—settled the divine service—gave a public and solemn charge to Solomon—praised God—left private directions with Solomon—in his last words, prophesied of the Saviour—died in a good old age.

WE are now advanced in the course of our meditations to the close of David's life; a life of uncommon activity and zeal in the cause of God, and of singular utility to his church. Nor are the last scenes of it the least interesting or instructive. This eminent servant of God will teach us how to die, as well as how to live.

Years before Toward the end of his reign his bodily Christ, 1015^b strength seems to have been much impaired. He was, probably, struck with a kind of dead palsy, which made it difficult for him to retain his animal heat.* An expedient was proposed, which we are ready to censure as inconsistent with his wisdom and gravity, but which he adopted in compliance with his physicians. He married the young Abishag, for the necessary purpose of supporting and invigorating his corporeal frame, and not for sensual gratification.

* 1 Kings i. 1, &c.

Whilst his indisposition unfitted him for public business, his tranquillity was again disturbed by the ambition of one of his own children. This, indeed, formed a part of the divine denunciation for his base misconduct; and therefore evil was still "raised up against him out of his own house." It was also the consequence of his sin in not properly restraining the corrupt inclinations of his offspring. The bad effects of this foolish tenderness had appeared in Absalom's rebellion. And now, Adonijah, the next in age, and similar in temper to Absalom, a man of admired beauty, whom his father had never checked or displeased at any time, aspired to the throne, and assumed the reins of government. The fond parent is generally punished in the ingratitude and opposition of those very children whom he has most indulged; for they cannot be influenced by any sense of obligation or duty who have been accustomed to be gratified in every wish of their hearts. By how many examples are we taught, that "the rod and reproof give wisdom; but a child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame. Correct thy son, then, and he shall give thee rest: yea, he shall give delight unto thy soul."*

Adonijah's attempt, which at first appeared formidable, was defeated by the timely interposition of the king, who declared it to be the appointment of God that Solomon should succeed to the crown, and commanded proclamation to be made of his immediate admission to the regal office. The people, who held

* Prov. xxix. 15, 17.

David in the highest veneration, as a prophet of God, instantly acquiesced, and received their new governor with loud demonstrations of joy, and earnest prayers for his prosperity. The aged father also exulted, and gave thanks to God for the completion of the promise, which secured the throne to Solomon. Doubtless the Lord will perform all his counsel, nor can any human opposition prevent it. But it is our duty in expectation of the event, to adopt and vigorously pursue those measures which may tend to promote it: and, if our eyes are permitted to see the accomplishment of the divine declarations, our hearts should be stirred up to the most lively exercise of gratitude and praise. Can we not, from our own experience, “set to our seals, that God is true?”

The strength of David was impaired by disease as well as by old age: yet, according to his ability, he continued active and incessant in his exertions for the glory of God, and the benefit of the church, even to the last. Much had his light shined in the former part of his life; but a peculiar splendour seemed to adorn this bright luminary towards the decline. Neither the infirmities of body, nor the approach of death, foreseen and felt, damped his ardour, but rather caused the flame of holy love and zeal, to burn with renewed vigour. Instead of being discouraged by the thought that he was quitting his place, and another ready to succeed him, he appeared determined to fill up the short period allotted him in an honourable manner, and, by his wise regulations and earnest exhortations, to extend his influence even to future ages. How much might be

done for the advancement of religion, and the prosperity of the state, if all were, like David, faithful and diligent, to the utmost of their abilities ! Do you not refuse your proper service, and satisfy yourselves with some paltry excuses for your neglect : What though you should not live to see the benefit of your labours, though you are soon to lie down in the grave, yet cease not to improve your talents, that others, who survive, may be the better for you ; and especially be concerned to leave a favourable testimony to the truth of God ; and so shall your name be had in estimation long after your departure.

Perhaps he recovered somewhat of his bodily strength ; but, however that be, his mind retained its full vigour to the end. We look with reverence on the wisdom and piety of the prophet, as well as on the authority of the king, while we observe him, with astonishing care and exactness, settling the order of the divine service in the temple, and appointing to the various officers their attendance and employment.* The Jewish church reaped the advantage for many ages ; and with gratitude we commemorate those eminent reformers in the Christian church, who were a blessing in their own times, and from whose zealous exertions we derive most solid benefits, even at this day. The Lord has a favour to that people, among whom He raises up men of such distinguished gifts, of such unshaken fortitude and unremitting diligence, to plead His cause, and to promote the interest of religion.

* 1 Chron. xxiii. and xxvii.

The vénéable king, when about to take his leave of the world, assembled together the prince, the captains of the army, and the heads of all the nation, that he might publicly declare to them the will of God concerning Solomon's succession and the building of the temple, and impress his parting admonition upon them with a peculiar solemnity and weight.* His address upon that occasion is an indubitable proof of the strength of his faith, and of his ardent desires to establish the knowledge and the worship of God among his subjects. He stood up before them, not assuming the pomp and the state of majesty, but rather as a preacher of righteousness, and as a messenger of the Lord; that he might testify his own earnestness, and fix their attention. He acquainted them with the design which he himself had formed, of erecting a magnificent house for the administration of God's service; and with the revelation he had received, overruling his purpose, deputing Solomon to that work, and promising to secure the kingdom to his posterity. He charged them, therefore, to adhere steadfastly to God, as they expected the continuance of His favour: and then, in the presence of them all, he called upon Solomon to devote himself to this heart-searching God, "without partiality and without hypocrisy," and to proceed with faithfulness and vigour to the execution of the task assigned him. For his direction and assistance, he delivered to him an exact description of the various parts of the temple, as communicated from Heaven; and sup-

* Chron, xxxviii. and xxix.

plied him with immense treasures for the building and the furniture. Difficult as this undertaking might appear to one so young as Solomon, his pious father encouraged him by the consideration of the divine promises, which engaged for his completion of it: and with much energy he requested the elders before him to lend their influence and support. Having set them the example, he was the more likely to prevail in calling upon them to consecrate some portion of their substance to the Lord.

The whole company, being instantly fired with the same holy fervour, contributed with an astonishing liberality. This was done, "not grudgingly, or of necessity," but of a ready mind, and with great gladness of heart, as if they accounted it a privilege to promote the work. The zeal of the people gave fresh animation and delight to their aged monarch, and constrained him to break forth, before the numerous assembly, into the most lively and devout acknowledgments "for the exceeding grace of God in them." He took no praise to himself; he paid no vain compliments to them; but with pious admiration celebrated the divine goodness in conferring such an honour upon them. With warmest gratitude he bowed before the Lord, adoring Him as the supreme, almighty, sovereign Proprietor of all, and ascribing to Him both their abundance, and their desire to use it for His glory. He was not only thankful for the holy joy which they then felt, but he poured out his soul in ardent supplication that they might be preserved in the same disposition, and never depart from the service of their God.

In a particular manner he prayed that Solomon might continue in a faithful adherence to his duty, and execute his trust with fidelity. Probably the seventy-second Psalm was written for this occasion. Therein the devout father implored and predicted the blessing of God upon his son, and with a lively faith looked forward, beyond the prosperous reign of Solomon, to the infinitely superior advantages of the government of Messiah, who was to descend from his family. He then called upon the whole congregation to join in the worship. Accordingly, with one heart and voice, they praised the Lord God of Israel: and, having done this, they expressed their reverence also for their pious and beloved king. Very numerous sacrifices were offered to Heaven; a sacred festival was observed; Solomon was again anointed to his office, and the regal authority resigned to him.

The effect of this solemnity upon the minds of the people must have been great and lasting. They could not, surely, but be forcibly impressed in favour of religion, when they saw such an amiable pattern of it in the most exalted station, and heard so strong a testimony of its reality and excellence from his lips, who was then quitting the world. David had fallen, and dishonoured the cause of God; but he had been spared to exhibit full proofs of his recovery; and now especially, at the close of life, after a long course of steadfast obedience, he shone brighter than ever. An example of this kind, in the circumstances here described, cannot fail of being a public and an extensive blessing. Who can withstand its influence?

But how are we ourselves affected by it? What conclusion do we draw from this transaction? Is it for kings and prophets only to be zealous for God? Are not we also concerned, in our respective places, to promote the advancement of truth and righteousness? Particularly, if we are soon to resign our post, should we not be anxious to give an open attestation of our principles to those who shall survive us? Our friends and relations will then listen to us with peculiar attention; and our dying behaviour may confirm them in the love and practice of every good word and work. A real regard for the glory of God, and an eager desire to save the souls of our fellow-creatures, (the noblest motives which can actuate the human heart!) will make us endeavour to extend our influence beyond our own short existence, and add an uncommon force and eloquence to our exhortations in our last moments.

We ought to be solicitous for the best interests of the dear children who are about to stand in our place, and for the continuance of the knowledge of God in our families. The little strength which sickness or old age may leave us will be well employed in charging them, by every consideration, steadfastly to maintain the profession of true godliness, and in praying for their establishment and perseverance.

A magnificent temple was to be raised, which called for the most liberal exertions of David and his subjects. And are there no works of piety which demand our charitable assistance? Are we ready, according to our ability, to contribute to the due administration of

the divine ordinances, to the support and propagation of the Gospel? Ah! where is our boasted love to God, if we determine that our religion shall cost us nothing? It will be to no purpose to exhort others "to consecrate their service to the Lord," if we ourselves are backward to do the same. Our own example will be the most persuasive argument to enforce the duty. While we are "ready to distribute, willing to communicate," many around us, who are witnesses of our ardour, may catch the holy fire, and unite their zealous endeavours to promote the honour of God. But let us render the sacrifice of a devoted heart, not from constraint, but "because we have set our affection to the house of our God." Nor let any presume to make an ostentatious display of their liberality, as if they had a meritorious claim to the divine favour. For "who hath first given to Him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again?" Learn from David to bow with deepest humiliation before the Lord of hosts, to lay your services at His feet, and to ascribe it to his distinguishing mercy that you possess the desire, as well as the ability, to be useful. In this way only your offerings will be acceptable. You should say then, "Of him, and through him, and to him, are all things."* You should also rejoice to see others brought under the influence of the same grace: every such instance should fill your soul with admiring gratitude to God, who is pleased to take out of our apostate race "a people for his name." O, let us pray that he would confirm the thing that He has

* Rom. xi. 35, 36.

wrought, and “ keep it for ever in the imagination of the thoughts of the heart of his people, and prepare their heart unto himself !”

When David more evidently perceived his dissolution approaching, still anxious for the prosperity of Israel, he pressed upon his son Solomon, in private, a serious and fixed attention to religion, and to the important duties of his station, as the only way in which he could expect the continuance of the Lord's favour.* He gave him also some directions of political expediency, for the regulation of his conduct toward certain persons who would be near him. He recommended to his friendship and patronage the sons of Barzillai, in grateful remembrance of the kindness he had received from that family. But he warned him of Joab, as a dangerous and impious character, and charged him to punish that insolent, murderous, and disaffected leader of his armies, who had long deserved to die for his numerous crimes, and whom David himself had spared through a blameable timidity. Shimei was also pointed out to him as a profane wretch, who could not be trusted, and who had merited the severest vengeance for cursing the king in the day of his calamity. David, indeed, had promised with an oath not to put the last offender to death : but his successor was not bound by that promise. Probably Shimei continued to manifest a seditious spirit, which might make it necessary for the security of government to watch his movements, and which David might foresee would soon give occasion to “ bring down his hoary head to the grave

* 1 Kings ii. 1, &c.

with blood." This was in fact the case, as the following reign will inform us.

Such a representation of the matter, which is fair and consistent, will sufficiently obviate the charge, that David in his dying moments evinced a malevolent, sanguinary, and revengeful disposition. Nothing more can properly be drawn from the history than that he was influenced by a regard to national justice and the welfare of the people, whom he was then leaving in trust with an inexperienced youth. Various commands and actions are expedient, and even necessary, in a magistrate, which in a private person might be condemned as cruel and malicious. Unless we could discern the inward principles of those who are placed in a public station, we are very incompetent to decide on many parts of their conduct. "Let every man prove his own work;" and let those, who are forward to censure the king of Israel, not dare to justify what is evidently wrong in their own tempers or practice, but "judge themselves, that they be not judged of the Lord."

If we would form a fair opinion of this man of God in the close of life, we should accompany him at that solemn season, when he is said to have uttered his "last words."* His dying sentiments are recorded; and they were delivered under the immediate and powerful influence of the Holy Ghost. Not ashamed of his mean original, he commemorated the divine goodness, which took him from an obscure family, and fixed him in a most distinguished rank, both in the

* 2 Sam. xxiii. 1--7.

church and state. " He was raised up on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet Psalmist of Israel." For he had been employed, not only in the affairs of government, but in providing sacred songs for the public service of the temple. He sustained the character of a prophet as well as of a prince ; and therefore he asserted that he had been favoured with remarkable communications from Heaven, and had declared only what the Spirit of the Lord revealed to him. On one particular subject the Lord God had given him the clearest information, discovering to him the dignity, the offices, the salvation, of that glorious Personage, the Messiah, whose coming he then predicted, and from whom he professed to derive all his comforts and expectations.* He represented this exalted Deliverer as the King of Zion, who should " judge the world in righteousness," " the Just One, ruling in the fear of God," or bringing men to a state of holy obedience. He described the effect of His appearance by the enlivening influence of the sun, which with its unequalled splendour disperses the darkness, and cheers universal nature ; and by the renovation of the face of the earth, which the refreshing showers produce in a dry season. The venerable Prophet, therefore, fixed his last and most earnest regard on the Saviour, rejoicing in the grace which is treasured up in Him, and which is secured by the strongest

* The passage has been generally allowed to be a full and express prophecy of the Saviour: and this explanation has been ably vindicated by Bishop Chandler, in his *Defence of Christianity*, page 235

and most inviolable engagements of God himself. He experienced much distress from his children, and probably foresaw dreadful confusion among his posterity ; yet he testified his confidence that the Lord would not withdraw his kindness from him, but fulfil that everlasting covenant of which he had been permitted to partake. Of this covenant, as the basis of all intercourse between God and sinners, he expressed his high esteem, declaring it to be complete and unalterable, the ground of all his dependence, and the object of his warmest affections. It is "ordered in all things, and sure," said the dying saint ; "it is all my salvation, and all my desire." His hopes might seem to be checked by the very slow progress he had made in the divine life, or by the distance of time, through which he looked to the incarnation of the Redeemer : yet a belief of the faithfulness and love of God dispersed his fears.* He concluded his testimony with a description of the character and destruction of ungodly men. He had seen his own throne established ; and he was confident that the kingdom of Jesus must prosper, in spite of all opposition. Such as refuse to submit are "sons of Belial," worthless and vexatious, like the thorns which are cast away, fit only to be burned : and the fire of the wrath of God awaits them.

Here, then, we have a decided proof that he died,

* "Although he make it not to grow," ver. 5, may be understood in either of these senses ; the grace of the covenant had not been in a vigorous state within him ; or, "the Messenger and Surety of the Covenant" was not soon to appear.

under the influence of the Holy Ghost, in an exercise of faith and hope the most glorious that can be conceived. To such cases as this we are not afraid to appeal for a full attestation of the reality and excellence of religion. It is no "cunningly-devised fable" of imposters, no pleasing dream of visionaries and enthusiasts. There is that in it which can take away every bitter ingredient in affliction, and inspire confidence and joy in the near prospect of death and eternity. Is this blessedness what we have attained? Can we meet our last enemy with the same tranquillity and courage? We feel the approaches of our dissolution; do we not inquire, What will support us in it? What will enable us to triumph over it?

We shall learn, from the king of Israel, that no elevation of rank, no outward splendour, will then bear up the mind: nor will the recollection of the most eminent services we have performed be a firm ground of reliance: but the knowledge of the Son of God, and a clear view of our interest in "the everlasting covenant," will make us more than conquerors. What should cast down the believer? Not his personal nor his domestic troubles, not even his shame and distress for his misconduct and declensions. Let the merciful engagements of God in Christ be properly apprehended and rested in, and it will be no presumption for him to rejoice. Have we, then, considered the Saviour, according to this exalted description of him? Are we convinced of the equity of his government, and become his obedient subjects? Have we felt the

cheering beams of this "Sun of righteousness?" Have the refreshing showers of his grace given life and vigour to our souls? He, to whom David looked forward through a period of a thousand years, has now appeared, and "confirmed the covenant." Can unbelief itself require a stronger basis of hope and expectation? Have we "taken hold of this covenant?" How, then, do we esteem it? Do we admire it, as "ordered in all things," "perfect and entire, wanting nothing?" And can we credit its promises, as "sure?" Is this our whole dependence towards God? And is it the desire of our hearts that we may continue to enjoy its blessings upon earth, and obtain the completion of them in heaven! This would be indeed to resemble the dying Patriarch. But how numerous are "the sons of Belial!" O, fear to be found in the company of those who are disaffected to the interests of the Prince of peace! Ah! what aggravated ruin awaits them! Their violent tempers may now threaten to wound those who shall resist them, like the sharp-pointed thorns; but the executioners of the divine vengeance shall be sufficiently armed to destroy them, and shall "bind them in bundles to burn them."

This eminent servant of God, we have seen, had been obscured by many a dark cloud, but at last his sun went down with uncommon splendour. "He died in a good old age, full of days, riches, and honour."* "After he had served his own generation by the will of God, he fell on sleep, and was laid unto his fathers,

* 1 Chron. xxix. 28.

and saw corruption.”* In his life he had been actuated by an uniform regard to the will and the glory of God, while he studied to promote the best interests of his people : and his end was in peace : the good man closed his day of labour with composure and serenity, just as the wearied go to rest. Great and useful as he had been, he was not exempted from the stroke of death ; but, like all his fathers before him, he experienced the original sentence against sin, “Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” Such is the conclusion of all human grandeur. Kings, as well as beggars, must lie down in the grave, and see corruption. Let us not covet those envied distinctions, which we must soon resign, but seek for that true excellency of character, which alone will accompany us into the eternal world. Let us turn from the consideration of David to a serious examination of ourselves. Are we serving God in our generation, as this illustrious Prophet did? Or have we the same blessed confidence that we shall “behold the face of God in righteousness, and be satisfied, when we awake, with his likeness?”† The time of our departure cannot be far distant. May we “give diligence to make our calling and election sure, and count not our lives dear unto us, so that we may finish our course with joy, and receive the promise of eternal inheritance among the saints in light!” Amen.

* Acts xiii. 36.

† Psal. xvii. 15.

DAVID

A TYPE OF CHRIST.

SECT. VII.

David, a preacher and inspired writer—his Psalms predictions of Christ—his imprecations—considered as a type of Messiah, who was called by the same name, and born in the same town—a shepherd—appointed of God to the kingdom—long opposed—reproached and persecuted—under spiritual desertion—head of the Heathen, as well as of all Israel—ruled in righteousness—regulated the divine service—pardoned enemies, and punished the obstinately rebellious—confirmed in the kingdom by covenant—yet far inferior to the Saviour.

THE life and character of David are of such peculiar eminence in the sacred writings, that they demand a large share of attention in these practical observations. It will appear that he was much honoured of God, if we remark the very high exaltation to which he rose, the continual protection and support he received from Heaven, and the extensive conquests and dominion bestowed upon him. Nor did these constitute his chief glory: we admire the exceeding grace of God in his spiritual attainments; and when we consider the depth of his contrition, the strength of his faith, the fervour of his love, the activity of his obedience, we are not afraid to assert, that, in this sense,

“he found favour before God,” and was “a man after his own heart.”*

In another view, also, we look up to him with veneration, as a preacher of righteousness, a prophet of the Lord, and one of the inspired authors of the holy Scriptures. His poetical compositions evince the sublimity of his genius : but they are to be regarded as superior to the production of mere human abilities ; for they are “the word of God :” it was “the Holy Ghost, who spake by the mouth of David.”† These divine hymns were intended, not for instruction only, but as models of prayer and praise for the church in all ages, to assist us in our private addresses to God, and to enliven our public devotions. Many things, indeed, will be found in them, as might be expected, unsuitable to our case, since our circumstances widely differ from his. But they exhibit an excellency of character, which we should study to imitate. Perhaps their principal recommendation is, that they contain such glorious predictions concerning the Saviour of the world. Some have thought that they all have a reference to Christ ; but, not to insist on this opinion, a large part of them confessedly belong to Him. Even where there must be a literal application to David, we are compelled to seek for a much nobler sense, and to fix our regard on the great Redeemer.

The Psalms describe, more clearly than any other portion of the Old Testament, Him who was to come, “the Consolation of Israel.” There we perceive the

* Acts vii. 46. xiii. 22.

† Acts i. 16.

high dignity and mysterious person of Christ, who is David's Lord, as well as David's Son ; and who, as the supreme God, demands the love, trust, and worship of his people. We learn what offices He sustains for them, and behold him as their Prophet, Priest, and King ; their Shepherd, Husband, Leader, and Intercessor. We view him in all the different stages of his humiliation, assuming our nature, making his abode on the earth in circumstances of unparalleled meanness, contempt, persecution, and misery, and at last closing his suffering life by an ignominious and painful death. The very manner in which he was to be betrayed, mocked, scourged, crucified, is pointed out with an astonishing exactness. We hear the derisions of his enemies, and his own heavy complaints, when he was hanging on the cross. We are led with him to the grave ; but we also observe him rising from the dead, before he saw corruption. His return to the highest heavens, with a complete triumph over the powers of darkness, is accurately described : and we are warned to look for his second advent, when he shall judge the world in righteousness.

What a chain of connected and valuable prophecy is here ! We praise the condescension of our God, in giving such clear information of the grace of the Gospel to his servant David, and in preserving these holy records for the confirming of our faith, and enlivening of our hope. O, let us study the Psalms with an especial regard to Christ, that we may view the Saviour there ! And, while we read them upon our

knees, let us pray for "the Spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him."

But, though David appears to have been elevated in his devotions, and favoured with remarkable discoveries of his character, the work, the sufferings, and the glory of the Redeemer, it is objected that he possessed a bitter and implacable spirit against his opposers; and the imprecations contained in his own poetical compositions are adduced in support of the charge. This is an important subject; but our plan will neither require nor permit us to consider it at large. Yet some things may be suggested in reply. It cannot be said, surely, that the preceding history exhibits him as a man of a sanguinary vindictive temper. How many proofs are given to the contrary! Nay, we may venture to appeal to various passages of the Psalms themselves, for an undeniable testimony of his compassion, lenity, and forgiveness, towards the most injurious and murderous enemies. These observations should lead us to a more favourable construction of such parts as wear a different aspect. There are other solid reasons, which incline us so to interpret the maledictions in question, as to vindicate the moral character of David.

The Lord God himself presided as the chief Magistrate in the administration of the Jewish government, which has therefore been called a THEOCRACY. To Him the injured subject was taught to look up for redress, and from him the obstinately rebellious were warned to expect condign punishment. In this view, then, David might appeal to God, entreating Him to determine the equity of his cause, by inflicting the

threatened penalty on his enemies. This at least will justify many of those places in which he appears to pour forth bitter curses. Thus he cried in his distress, "Hear the right, O Lord, attend unto my cry, give ear unto my prayer, that goeth not out of feigned lips. Let my sentence come forth from thy presence; let thine eyes behold the things that are equal."*

It has often been urged, that, by supposing a change in the mode of speech, which is usual in the Hebrew language,† the imprecations are no other than predictions of evil. The most calamitous events, then, which seem to be desired and prayed for, may be only foretold as about to happen: and when it is said, "Let it be thus done," it may be fairly translated, at least in many places, "It shall be so accomplished." Such declarations do not imply that the speaker or the writer really wished for those events, or felt any impatience, malice, or revenge. Otherwise we must charge these detestable tempers upon the most holy men, at the very time when the Spirit of God rested on them in an eminent degree. They uttered what was agreeable to His will, and, by that particular form of speech, might design to testify their obedient acquiescence in it, even though extremely afflictive to themselves. Let it be allowed, then, that David, as a prophet, wrote under the divine inspiration, and all objections against his most tremendous curses must be removed. For who are we, that we should presume

* Psal. xvii. 1, 2.

† By the figure Enallage, the imperative mood may be used for the future tense of the indicative,

to cavil with the denunciations of Jehovah?—It is evident that this is a fair statement of the case, because some of the most offensive passages in the Psalms are in the New Testament ascribed to the Holy Ghost. Compare Psal. lxi. 25, and cix. 8, with Acts i. 16, 20.—These imprecations, therefore, cannot be pleaded in defence of angry and malicious words, since they are no patterns for our imitation, being delivered on extraordinary occasions, and by one sustaining an extraordinary character.

In many of them, the Lord Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah, is the chief speaker; and He himself, as the supreme and righteous Judge, passes sentence on his enemies, and demands their destruction. Thus it is He, rather than David, who says concerning those, who “gave him gall for his meat, and in his thirst gave him vinegar to drink.” Pour out thine indignation upon them, and let thy wrathful anger take hold of them:” “Let this be the reward of mine adversaries from the Lord, and of them that speak evil of my soul.”* And shall we dare to quarrel with his decisions? It becomes us to confess their equity; “Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are thy judgments!”†

It is certain that David was an eminent type of Christ; and that he frequently spake, as concerning himself, what was applicable only to the great Antitype. This observation, which is not controverted, opens a new field of inquiry. It would, indeed, be contrary to our plan to enter largely into it; but, as the subject

* Psal. lxi. 24, 24. cix. 20.

† Rev. xiv. 7.

is highly interesting, and as it may tend to illustrate many passages in the Psalms and Prophecies, we cannot wholly pass it by. May we discover more of the glory and grace of our Redeemer from every fresh representation of him; and, while we are looking at the figure, may we perceive and admire the excellency of the divine Original!

In the Old Testament the Messiah is pointed out to us by the name of David, not merely because it was designed that in his human nature he should descend from the same family, but because he should resemble that illustrious progenitor. The blessings of redemption are therefore called "the sure mercies of David."* For the same reason also, long after that prince was laid in the dust, it was declared that the nation should be recovered from their captivity, and "serve the Lord their God and DAVID their King."† The New Testament, which is careful to assert the completion of the Old, introduces to our view the glorious Personage promised to the Jews, as the Son and successor of their ancient ruler. Thus the Angel Gabriel announces his approach, "The Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David."‡

We shall inquire, then, briefly, of what sort this typical resemblance is, and what instruction we may derive from it. We shall not, indeed, insist on every instance of likeness, which a fruitful fancy might imagine, but touch only on those points which are clear and generally allowed. It might seem too trifling

* Isa. lv. 3. † Jer. xxx. 9. Ezek. xxxiv. 23, 24. xxxvii, 24, 25. Hos. iii, 5. ‡ Luke i. 32.

to mention, that the very same place, the town of Beth-lehem, gave birth to "the offspring of David," as well as to the distinguished ancestor. But even this circumstance was the subject of an express prophecy, and effected by a very singular interposition of Providence.* Perhaps, also, it deserves our notice, that David, in his original employment as a shepherd, prefigured the Saviour. For while he slew the lion, and the bear, in the defence of his flock,† he exhibited a striking representation of "the good Shepherd," who fleeth not when he seeth the wolf coming, nor leaveth the sheep to his assaults, but, rather than one of them should perish, layeth down his life for them.‡ How great is His condescension in undertaking their cause! How perfect their security who confide in His care!

The son of Jesse was appointed of God to his high office, and consecrated to it with the holy oil. The case of our exalted Leader is the same. Though, in his external appearance, mean "as a root out of a dry ground," He was set apart for his work in the counsels of Heaven from eternity, "chosen of God," consecrated by the Spirit, and thus "anointed with the oil of gladness above his fellows."§ Such is the description given of him by the Father, who demands our attention to him on this ground.|| Herein we perceive the eminent qualifications of "Messiah the Prince," and admire the harmony of the three Persons, concerting and accomplishing the plan of redemption.

* Mic. v. 2. Luke ii. 1--6.

† 1 Sam. xvii. 36.

‡ John x. 11--15.

§ Psal. xlv. 7.

|| Isa. xlii. 1.

We confess our obligations to obey Him, who comes to reign over us; "for Him hath God the Father sealed."*

David was designed for the kingdom; and the decree, to establish him in it, was published many years before he received the full possession. He had to pass through a series of painful and complicated trials, in order to attain the promise. Thus also the accession of Jesus to the dominion intended for him was long opposed. Though the Lord God had declared his fixed determination to "set his King upon his holy hill of Zion,"† He chose to permit various attempts repugnant to his purpose, and "to make the Captain of our salvation perfect through sufferings."‡ The man after God's own heart is exhibited, through a considerable portion of his life, in a state of reproach, persecution, and distress. But all comparison fails when we advert to the case of Him, who in his humiliation was more afflicted than any other, "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief."§ Yet a similitude in certain points must be allowed.

The expectations of David probably exposed him to many envious censures. His own kindred, in particular, reviled him, as acting from ambitious views, and other corrupt principles. When first he discovered his eminent abilities, "I know thy pride, and the naughtiness of thy heart," was the slanderous and cruel speech of his elder brother.|| We remember Jesus, also, coming under the very same malicious charges

* John vi. 27. † Psal. ii. 6. ‡ Heb. ii. 10. § Isa. liii. 3.

|| † Sam. xvii. 28.

from his near relations according to the flesh. When his divine power was manifested in his miracles, they suggested that he courted the public notice, and aimed at popularity, "seeking to be known openly." "If thou do these things," said they, "show thyself to the world." "For neither did his brethren believe in him."* Shall the followers of Christ, then, wonder or stagger in their minds, when they meet with sneers and contempt? "If they have called the Master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household?"† Nay, we are taught to expect this very treatment from those with whom we are most intimately connected.‡

In the very long persecution which David endured from the rage and tyranny of Saul, we perceive a resemblance of "the holy Child Jesus, against whom both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together."§ He whom the Lord intended to set upon the throne of Israel was obliged to fly for his life from place to place, and to hide himself in the dens and caves of the earth; so that, to appearance, he was often on the very point of perishing. Herein he represented the glorious Person to whom the universal kingdom belongs; for He also wandered from town to town, and very frequently, to avoid the violence of his adversaries, concealed himself from them, and escaped from their fury only by a miraculous flight.|| Ah! who shall dare to

* John vii. 3--5. † Matt. x. 25. ‡ x. 36. § Acts iv, 27,
|| Luke iv, 30. John viii. 59. x. 39.

complain of outward tribulations, with such examples as these before his eyes?

The ground of the opposition was the same in both cases; an apprehension that the established government was in danger. Saul considered the son of Jesse as his rival: Herod also suspected that his power would be subverted by Him "who was born King of the Jews;"* and there were those who suggested to Pilate that the claims of Jesus would effectually ruin the interests of the Roman emperors.† The conclusion in each instance was false and invidious. And let not holy men in any age or country be surprised if their designs be misrepresented in the very same way, and they be reproached as "troublers of Israel," or as "turning the world upside down."‡

David also met with formidable resistance from other quarters. Not to mention the hostile attempts of the Philistines, the Ammonites, and the Syrians, it will be recollected that his own nation remained for a long time disaffected towards him, and seemed ready to join in every conspiracy and rebellion against him. Some, who had professed a strong attachment to him, forsook his cause; and one in particular, who had been a partner of his counsels, and his familiar companion, proved a traitor, and sought his destruction. These were painful circumstances indeed. But they exhibit, though in a faint manner, the opposition against Messiah. Not only have the Gentiles been averse to His government, but, when "he came unto his own, his

* Matt. ii. 2, &c. † John xix. 12. ‡ 1 Kings xviii. 17, Acts xvii. 6.

own received him not.*" His citizens hated him, and sent a message after him, saying, " We will not have this man to reign over us.†" A murderer was preferred to the prince of life; and " Not this man, but Barabbas," was the general cry.‡ Many, who had favoured him, exclaimed, " Crucify him, crucify him." Even his select company of friends did not continue steadfast, but fled from him.§ One especially, who had been a near attendant upon his person, intrusted with his counsels, of a character exactly similar to that of Ahithophel, a base apostate, betrayed him into the hands of his enemies.|| It will not be overlooked that the execrable wickedness of Judas is described and his awful sentence denounced, in those very psalms, which might be originally composed with a reference to Ahithophel.¶ We admire the meekness and submission of David in his deepest afflictions; but Jesus, more than any other example, will teach us to " possess our souls in patience," and to say, " The cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink, it?"** Ah! how little have we learned to suffer as becometh Christians!

David received, in some of his heaviest trials, a large measure of divine consolations. But there were seasons of darkness, in which his soul was dismayed, when he complained unto God, as one utterly abandoned and abhorred. We behold the Saviour also, though ever dear to God, under spiritual desertion, and overwhelmed with the dread of his Father's wrath

* John i. 11.
 § Matt. xxvi. 56.

† Luke xix. 14,
 || xxvi. 14, 48.
 ** John xviii. 11.

‡ John xviii. 40.
 ¶ Psal. lxxix, and cix.

In that most tremendous situation, the Son of David cried out, in the words of his progenitor, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"* The children of God may sometimes be in a similar case, and adopt the same expressions of distress. But both these instances will instruct us, that, though "weeping may endure for a night, joy cometh in the morning."† Let us look to the end, nor refuse to "suffer with Jesus, that we may be also glorified together."

David was a man of war, and the leader of the armies of Israel. He stood forth as an undaunted champion in their cause, and conducted them from one glorious conquest to another. He alone dared to enter the lists, and maintain a single combat against the proud Goliath. Not indeed by human means, or by mere strength of arm, but "in the name of the Lord," he fought, overcame, and destroyed the insulting foe. At length he saw the persecuting Saul removed, the Philistines subdued, and all the neighbouring nations either desolated or made tributary to him. Those who had presumed to conspire against him were utterly defeated, and covered with confusion. Thus, "after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise," and possessed a very extensive dominion. He was constituted supreme governor of all the tribes of Israel, and, in a sense also, "the head of the Heathen,"‡ since many of them professed allegiance to him.

Such was the type, which exhibits a manifest resemblance of Him, who "is given for a leader and

* Psal. xxii. 1. Matt. xxvii. 46. † Psal. xxx. 5. ‡ xviii. 43.

Commander" to all the spiritual Israel. He is, above all others, "strong and mighty in battle." He has lifted up an ensign to the people, and encouraged all his faithful soldiers with this assurance, that he will go before them, and fight for them. He has undertaken with his own arm to subdue the proud usurper, who threatens and terrifies the hosts of Israel. He has also prevailed against him; for "through death He has destroyed him that had the power of death, that is, the devil."* We rejoice in the victory, and believe that "the God of peace will bruise Satan under our feet shortly."†

No resistance could possibly prevent the Saviour from taking possession of his kingdom. The united efforts of Jews and Gentiles did not defeat, but promote, his design. Even in his cross, he triumphed over all the schemes of earth and hell; and his lowest humiliation prepared the way for his highest advancement. Just before his ascension to glory, he said, "All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth,"‡ The Father hath "set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come."§ As yet, indeed, his spiritual government has not attained its utmost extent and perfection: for it is in a state of gradual increase and improvement. Many refuse submission to his yoke. But "his people shall be willing in the

* Heb. ii. 14. † Rom. xvi. 20. ‡ Matt. xxviii, 18,
§ Eph. i. 20, 21.

day of his power ;”* yea, all kings shall fall down before him ; all nations shall serve him.† For “ He must reign till he hath put all enemies under his feet.”‡ This is that “ Root of Jesse, which shall rise to reign over the Gentiles : in him shall the Gentiles trust.”§ The rebellious Jews, who still persist in their disaffection to him, shall soon throw down their arms, shall sue for mercy, and be subjected to his authority. O, let us pray for the further progress of this kingdom ! “ Gird thy sword upon thy thigh, O most mighty, with thy glory and thy majesty. And in thy majesty ride prosperously.”||

David’s regal character is allowed to have been just and upright : and the beneficial effects of his government were felt through every part of the nation.¶ From this view of the comparison, also, “ let the children of Zion be joyful in their King.” All his dispensations are like himself, “ holy, and just, and good.” His subjects, therefore, will derive the most valuable blessings from a cordial and unreserved submission to him. Should they dislike his appointments, or wish to be excused from obedience, they would, at the same time, be enemies to their own interest. You, then, who complain of his conduct towards you, or censure his commands as too strict and severe, understand neither the excellency of his administration, nor the nature of real happiness. We entreat you to bow down to our Jesus ; for in him is the prophecy fulfilled : “ Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will

* Psal. cx. 3. † lxxii. 11. ‡ 1 Cor. xv. 25. § Rom. xv. 12.

|| Psal. xlv. 3, 4. ¶ 2 Sam. viii. 15. Psal. lxxviii. 72.

raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, **THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.**”*

We have seen the attention of David to the divine service. He fixed the due order of the priests and Levites in their offices, and gave directions for the regular observance of the sacred ordinances. And do we not perceive and admire, in our illustrious Head, a similar care to promote the comfort and prosperity of his church? He requires our serious regard to his own positive institutions, which He has appointed “for the perfecting of the saints.” To him, therefore, we are taught to look, as to the great “Master of assemblies:” and, in obedience to Him, we sanctify his day, we frequent his house, we celebrate his sacraments, we reverence his faithful ministers, and listen to “the word of reconciliation.” We rejoice, also, in the expectation of his presence and blessing; for he has said, “Lo! I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.”†

David has exhibited an amiable pattern in the forgiveness of his most violent opposers. But, though he wished not their destruction, their continued disaffection made it necessary to inflict the severest punishments. Such also is the government of Jesus. He “desireth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness, and live.” He weeps

* Jer. xxiii. 5, 6.

† 2 Matt. xxviii. 20.

over the most obdurate, entreats them to be reconciled, and offers them a full and free pardon, upon their unfeigned submission. But let not the rebellious, who persist in their contempt of him, presume upon impunity. "His enemies shall lick the dust: He will destroy them that hate him: He will break them with a rod of iron: He will dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." How forcible, then, is the application to every one of us, "Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him."*

The Lord God established the covenant of royalty with David, and, by express promise, ensured to his family the possession of the throne of Judah.† This was emblematical of "the everlasting covenant," which the Father has been pleased to make with his Son Jesus Christ, for the perpetuity of His kingdom through all generations. Such is the gracious declaration, addressed, indeed, to David as the type, but in words which are suitable only to the great Antitype; "My mercy will I keep for him for evermore, and my covenant shall stand fast with him. His seed also will I make to endure for ever, and his throne as the days of heaven."‡ Here, then, we perceive our own security under our exalted Leader: The Lord Jesus reigneth: and so firm is the foundation on which his government rests, that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."§ If by faith we become obedient

* Psal. lxxii. 9. xviii. 40. ii. 9, 12. † Psal. cxxxii. 11. lxxxix. 4. ‡ 28, 29. § Matt. xvi. 18.

to Him, we are entitled to the benefits of the covenant! We are his seed, to whom the promises belong; and he says to us, "Because I live, ye shall live also."*

In every view, with which this comparison has presented us, we discover the infinite superiority of the Saviour. Nor is it possible that any resemblance should give us an adequate conception of his dignity and glory. In his humble nature, He may be represented by a man like ourselves; but he possesses divine perfections, and is above all description, as being "the brightness of his Father's glory, and the express image of his person."† The dominion also, which He exercises, surpasses in its excellency, its advantages, its extent and duration, all the kingdoms which have been, or can be, established on the earth. All others must fall before it, and finally be swallowed up in it;‡ and Jesus "shall reign for ever and ever."§

Enough has been said to show us our unspeakable obligations to the Son of God. Shall we not, then, reverence, worship, love, trust, and obey Him? Shall we not indulge a holy joy and triumph, while we confide in Him? Shall we not remain true to his interests, and exert every faculty to promote his cause in the world? Shall we not shout "Hosanna to his name," and pray that "the whole earth may be filled with his glory?" May He take to himself his great power, and so extend his reign, that "the kingdoms of this world may become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ!" Amen.

* John xiv. 19. † Heb. i. 3. ‡ Dan. ii. 44. § Rev. xi. 15.

SOLOMON.

CHAP. V.—SECT. I.

Solomon—his birth and names—appointed to the throne—punished offenders—his attention to religion, and the Lord's favour to him—prayed for and obtained wisdom—his discernment in judging—his peace, prosperity, magnificence, and understanding—an inspired writer—built the temple at Jerusalem—dedicated it to God, and received fresh assurances of the divine regard.

THE Scripture history debases the pride of all human glory, and exhibits, in each character we contemplate, sufficient cause for the deepest humiliation. The person, whose life comes next in order, represents our nature at one time in a state of highest advancement, and at another reduced to extreme infamy. Here we behold a man, who was raised above the level of his species, not only by his rank, but by the excellency of his understanding, who yet degenerated to a degree of folly and wickedness, which, in such an instance, we should have supposed impossible. Where, except in our first parent, have we met with a similar example; the most eminent wisdom disgraced by the basest apostacy? Perhaps we may be at a loss to pronounce concerning the final condition of Solomon, nor is it necessary. The instructions to be derived from this

awful case are neither doubtful, nor uninteresting to any one. Let us set ourselves to the consideration of it with true seriousness of mind, and with earnest prayer, that, whatever might be the state of Solomon, We may not be “ of them who draw back unto perdition, but of them that believe to the saving of the soul.”

Our expectations concerning this illustrious personage are raised antecedently to his birth, while we observe that he was the subject of a remarkable prediction delivered to his father David. “ Behold,” said God, “ a son shall be born to thee, who shall be a man of rest, and I will give him rest from all his enemies round about: for his name shall be SOLOMON,* and I will give peace and quietness unto Israel in his days. He shall build an house for my name, and he shall be my son, and I will be his Father, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom over Israel for ever.”† Doubtless there was a reference herein to the Messiah, the greater Son of David, whom Solomon prefigured. But we are also led to look for a peculiar eminence of **Years before** character in David’s immediate successor, **Christ, 1033**. As soon as he was brought into the world, a prophet was commissioned to declare the divine favour toward him, and to give him a name expressive of this regard. “ The Lord loved him, and sent by the hand of Nathan the prophet, and called his name Jedidiah,‡ because of the Lord.”§ After such information we cannot but inquire, “ What manner of child shall this be?”

* That is, PEACEABLE. † 1 Chron. xxii. 9, 10.

‡ That is, BELOVED OF THE LORD. § 2 Sam. xii. 24, 25.

Years before Christ, 1015. He was appointed to the throne by the direction of God; and, on that ground, David caused him to be publicly consecrated, and admitted to the regal office, before his own death. An opposition was made to his accession by the elder brother Adonijah, but soon defeated; and the kingdom was fully established in the hands of Solomon.* He came to the crown with every conceivable advantage, and the most hopeful appearances. The beginning of his reign, indeed, seems to be stained with blood; and we might apprehend the most sanguinary and tyrannical proceedings in the sequel, from some of his first acts, which yet might be a proper and necessary exercise of justice.

Adonijah, who had endeavoured to seize the reins of government, and had been pardoned only conditionally, probably still entertained treasonable designs. It was therefore a matter of political expediency, at least, to frustrate the plot by instantly removing the rebel.

Abiathar, the high-priest, had deserved to die, for taking part with the conspirators: but, from a regard to the services which he performed for David in his affliction, the punishment was mitigated: he was thrust out of his office, and banished to a retired situation.

Joab, that turbulent and factious general, had long merited the severest vengeance of the law, and still remained disaffected to the reigning prince. Solomon, therefore, commanded him to be dragged even from the sanctuary, and slain; and herein he acted agreeably

* 1 Kings i. 5, &c. ii. 12, &c.

to the word of God,* as well as consulted the peace and security of the state.

Shimei too was a dangerous character. He experienced the royal clemency for a time : but at length he violated his oath, and proved by his perfidy that he could no longer be confided in ; and therefore he also fell by the hand of justice.

In these instances we perceive no good reason for censuring the conduct of Solomon. He was intrusted with the supreme authority, “ for the punishment of evil-doers ; and it is required of civil magistrates, that they “ bear not the sword in vain.” Thus the Lord God fulfilled his own promise, confounded and destroyed every enemy to the succession which he had appointed, and confirmed Solomon in the complete and undisputed possession of the regal power. The hearts of the people were firmly attached to their new prince. They obeyed, they loved, they revered him. This also was of the Lord, who “ magnified Solomon exceedingly in the sight of all Israel, and bestowed upon him such royal majesty as had not been on any king before him in Israel.”†

We are taught to see and acknowledge the hand of the Lord in every event. The universal kingdom is His ; and “ He doeth according to his will.” Men may oppose, but they cannot frustrate, his counsels. “ The powers that be are ordained of God.” If their subjects be preserved in peace and due allegiance, even this is from Him, “ who alone can order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men.” The favour

* Exod. xxi. 14.

† 1 Chron. xxix. 25.

and influence we obtain with others is such as He gives us. All personal accomplishments, mental endowments, and abilities for public usefulness, are His grant, conferred and resumed at his pleasure. How forcibly do these considerations incite us to admire, love, trust, and serve the Lord God Almighty! Let us live in dependence upon Him for all we want, exert every faculty for the honour of his name, and ascribe to his sovereign mercy every blessing we enjoy. "For of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever! Amen."*

Solomon was distinguished by the splendour of his majesty; but it is a higher recommendation of him, that "he loved the Lord, walking in the statutes of David his father."† He appeared mindful of the many pious exhortations he had received from his aged parent, and began his reign with such a serious attention to religion, and to the sacred ordinances, as seems to warrant the conclusion that he was truly devoted to the service of his God. It is remarked, indeed, as an objection to his character, that he complied with the custom, to which the people were extremely addicted, of sacrificing and performing other rites "in high places," after the manner of the Heathen nations. Whatever might be his motive, the action itself was wrong, and of a dangerous tendency. It becomes us to take care that our very good be not evil-spoken of; and therefore we must "abstain from all appearance of evil."

* Rom. xi. 36.

† 1 Kings iii. 3, &c.

Soon after his accession to the throne, he held a festival of peculiar solemnity, at the head of all his nobles and the elders of Israel, before the ancient tabernacle of Moses, which was fixed at Gibeon.* There he worshipped the Lord according to the regular and instituted mode, supplicating the divine blessing upon himself and his people; and there he received a singular manifestation of the favour of Heaven. God appeared to him in "the visions of the night," and proposed to give him whatever he should ask. Solomon abused not the gracious and extensive offer; for his mind had been previously prepared to ask aright. What then was the choice of the young prince? Not an increase of wealth, or power, or honour, but wisdom and understanding, that he might discharge his important trust to the glory of God, and the benefit of his subjects. In humble adoration of that goodness which had raised him to the most elevated rank, under a deep sense of the weakness and inexperience of his youth, and from an apprehension of peculiar difficulties in his arduous situation, he earnestly besought the Lord to inspire him with such knowledge, that he might "minister judgment to the people in uprightness." The petition pleased the Lord, who therefore declared that his utmost desires should be satisfied, and that even what he had not solicited, additional riches and dignity, far beyond the possessions of other kings, should be granted him. Length of days also was promised to him, on the condition of his persevering obedience. From this solemnity he returned to Jerusalem, and

* 2 Chron. i. 1, &c.

there again, with fervent gratitude, he offered many sacrifices, and sealed his vows before the ark of the covenant. Such a public testimony in favour of religion could not but produce the most beneficial consequences throughout the nation.

WE are not called to the like advancement, nor ought we to expect the same revelation, as Solomon. But there is not one, even in the lowest circumstances, who is not bound to worship the Lord, and to pay a serious regard to all the ordinances which he has appointed. And as none are exempted from the obligation, so there is the strongest encouragement for all to "seek the Lord and his strength." Through Jesus Christ, as our prevailing Advocate, the throne of grace is accessible, not to king's only, but to persons of the meanest rank : and the proposal made to Solomon is, in effect, applied to every one of us, "Ask what I shall give thee." For thus says our Redeemer, "If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it."* But do we observe a general attention to the service of God? Do young men, especially, and those who possess riches and power, discover the same earnest desire as Solomon to obtain the divine blessing? Who is there, of this description, that has dedicated himself to the God of heaven? How many are devoting their best years to vanity and sin? Regardless of all spiritual benefits which the Gospel offers, and with an utter contempt of "the wisdom that is from above," they covet only an increase of those gifts which will gratify their ambition or sensual affections. But you, who are taught to pray

* John xiv. 14.

for grace, that you may glorify God in your proper station, adore that mercy which has made you to differ from others ; and be assured that He, who has thus disposed your hearts, will approve and fulfil your petitions. Entreat him, then, that he would impart to you the knowledge and love of himself, an interest in his covenant, a conformity to his image, an ability to serve him, and a lively hope of his kingdom ; and you need not fear a repulse. Continue, at least, to urge your requests, and you shall not finally be denied. Nay, come with large expectations, and, through the merit of your great High-Priest, you shall obtain “above all that you ask or think.” You have seen the efficacy of prayer with respect to Solomon ; for the Lord granted, and even far exceeded, his desires. You also may look for similar success : only “be not faithless, but believing.”

That eminent degree of wisdom, which was bestowed upon Solomon, soon excited general admiration, and promoted the public good. A very difficult case occurred, which was referred to the decision of the king, and proved his acute discernment in the administration of justice. Two women, who dwelt together, had each been delivered of a son ; and, upon the death of one of the infants, both demanded the living child as their own. Their pleas seemed equally valid, their claims equally strong ; and no evidence could be adduced to determine the contest.” “Divide the living child in two,” said Solomon “and give half to the one, and half to the other.” The sentence immediately discovered the real mother, who, when she saw

the sword prepared for the execution, yearned over her infant with the tenderest affection, and prayed that it might be spared ; willing rather to resign it to the false claimant than to be witness of its destruction.

The depravity of human nature has rendered the province of judges and magistrates extremely difficult indeed. Such persons, therefore, have especial need to beg of God that He would direct their inquiries, and give them a quickness of perception “to search out a matter.”* Thus will they be a peculiar blessing to the state, when they are careful to “judge righteously between every man and his brother, and the stranger that is with him.”† And “the king that faithfully judgeth the poor, his throne shall be established for ever.”‡

Those also, who preside in spiritual concerns, should learn from Solomon to seek the proper qualifications for their office by fervent prayer. Are they called to “go out and come in” before a numerous people, and to distinguish between the different claims of religious professors? How arduous and important the work ! Even such ministers of Christ, as possess the most eminent abilities, may well cry out, “Who is sufficient for these things? O, give thy servants an understanding heart !” They should not despise human literature, but diligently improve it for the service of the sanctuary. Yet, with the best advantages of education, they may be “blind guides,” and mislead those immortal souls who trust to their judgment. O, that God would therefore pour out “the Spirit of under-

* **Prov. xxv. 2.** † **Deut. i. 16.** ‡ **Prov. xxix. 14.**

standing" upon all the pastors and governors of his church, that they may, "discern between good and bad!"

The reign of Solomon is celebrated for its peace and prosperity, as well as for the wisdom and equity of his administration.* His subjects were firmly united together, and undisturbed by any foreign assaults; so that they multiplied exceedingly, and enjoyed the fruits of their labour in quiet and security. His dominion, also, was enlarged to an extent unknown before: in consequence of which, his wealth and magnificence received an amazing increase. But the part of his character, for which he has been most admired, is the peculiar eminence of his understanding. He was endowed with an unequalled discernment in other sciences, as well as in divine things, and the art of government. Nor was his learning useless; much did he speak, and much did he write, for the instruction of mankind, particularly on the subject of morals and natural philosophy. Many of his compositions are now lost; but we are favoured with three specimens, which have a distinguished place in the sacred canon, and are a valuable treasure to the church of God. We do not wonder that such uncommon abilities procured him so high estimation in the world.

But we turn our eyes from Solomon, to observe the hand of God in the gifts bestowed upon him. Let us not forget that riches, power, peace, and prosperity, are dispensed among sons of men, even as He, the Almighty Sovereign, pleaseth. He alone appoints the

* 1 Kings iv, 20, &c.

difference we perceive in all attainments : for “ a man can receive nothing, except it be given him from Heaven.”* It is manifest that Solomon’s pre-eminence was granted him in answer to prayer, and in performance of the divine promises. We do not expect or need the like superiority ; but an “ understanding in the way of godliness” is absolutely necessary for all : and this also “ cometh from above.” We are encouraged to apply for it with fervent petitions ; for a gracious voice declares, “ If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not ; and it shall be given him.”†

Years before Christ, 1012. The building of the temple was one grand object to which Solomon directed his attention. For this particular purpose he was raised up of God, and blessed with peace and prosperity. He had been appointed to the work by express prophecy before his birth, and charged to undertake it by the solemn injunctions of his dying father. Nor was he unmindful of his commission ; but with great ardour he proceeded to the execution of the plan, as soon as the preparations requisite could be made. We stand in admiration of his zeal for the honour of God, while we observe that for seven years together he was vigorously employed in erecting that splendid edifice, for the administration of the divine service, and that he was not unwilling to devote his wealth to the sanctuary. It pleased God to give him the friendship of a neighbouring prince, the king of Tyre, who was, in a remarkable manner, disposed to lend his utmost assistance

* John iii. 27.

† James i. 5.

for the accomplishment of Solomon's design.*—How wonderful are the ways of Providence! The Lord appoints to each of us our proper work, and He will not fail so to order our circumstances, that we shall be furnished with every thing needful for the right performance of it. Only let us be faithful and diligent, and exert all our abilities in obedience to Him. Whatever riches we possess, whatever alliances we form, let us keep in view the end of our calling, and use every advantage, which our situation may put into our hands, in a subserviency to His glory.

We cannot here enter into a minute description of the very magnificent house which Solomon erected for the name of the God of Israel, or point out the design of its various parts and utensils. Suffice it to say, that the whole was executed agreeably to the directions which David had received from Heaven, and delivered to his son.† When the temple was completed, the king himself, with the greatest solemnity and most ardent piety, dedicated it to God, and implored his blessing upon it.‡ Then indeed he shone in his brightest lustre; nor can we conceive any thing upon earth more grand and majestic than his behaviour upon that sacred occasion. We are compelled to revere the character of the monarch, who with an uncommon zeal stood before his nobles and all his princes, as a preacher of righteousness, and as a priest of the most high God.

* 1 Kings v. 1, &c.

† 1 Kings vi. and vii.

‡ 1 Kings viii. 2 Chron. v. vi. and vii.

Years before Christ, 1004 Having assembled together the elders of his people, he conducted the ark of the covenant into the most holy place appointed for it, with loud thanksgivings to God ; and immediately “ the glory of the Lord filled the house,” as a token of His gracious presence. Then the king, in the audience of all the congregation, declared the purposes for which the temple was erected, and praised God for the completion of His promises concerning it. Upon an eminence, which was raised in the midst of the court before the altar, he kneeled down, and, spreading forth his hands toward Heaven, he poured out the devout emotions of his soul. He acknowledged the faithfulness and goodness of God in putting such an honour upon him, and prayed that the further engagements of mercy, on behalf of his posterity, might be fulfilled. Considering the immensity and majesty of Jehovah, he seemed to shrink back from the idea of expecting His residence within those consecrated walls ; but, encouraged by his gracious assurances, he implored his favour toward all who should worship in that house.—His petitions being ended, he arose from his knees, and pronounced his benediction upon the people. He entreated, he charged them, to dedicate themselves to God without reserve, and to persevere in their obedience with an unshaken integrity. He then called upon them to join with him in offering sacrifices, and in other solemn rites, which were continued for fourteen days together. This was indeed a sacred festival to the Lord ; in which, probably, more fervent piety appeared, than on any occasion we

have ever heard of. The very numerous congregations were deeply impressed by the prayers and exhortations of their sovereign. They saw the divine glory descending upon the temple, and the fire from heaven consuming their oblations, and were constrained to bow before the Lord in adoration of His mercy. At length they were dismissed, with sentiments of love and admiration toward their prince, and of holy joy and gratitude toward God, who had bestowed such favours upon them.

But what do we learn from the example before us? Let us not suppose that "the great men of the earth" are the only persons who are bound to exert themselves for the honour of God. It is a common cause, which requires the united influence of all ranks and conditions. What, then, are we doing, to promote this end? Are we joining in the worship of God with real ardour of devotion? And are we exciting others to it? Ah! what mean that languor and indifference which we observe to be generally prevalent in all religious concerns? The temple of Jerusalem, so set apart as we have seen, was the place where all the Jews were commanded to offer up their sacrifices. But now the Lord will manifest his gracious presence in every place where his faithful people meet, will hear and answer their petitions. O, be thankful, you, who enjoy those ordinances, to which the divine blessing is promised! Consider their value: be constant, be serious, be fervent in your attendance upon them. "Wait on the Lord," in his instituted means, and you "shall renew your strength."—"Enter into His courts," and

“ worship at his footstool,” with faith and love, and you also shall behold his glory.

The instance before us proves that it is not vain to seek God. Solomon received a fresh assurance, in a vision, that his prayer was accepted, and that a favourable regard would be paid to the services of the temple.* The Lord also renewed the covenant with him, declaring that a perseverance in righteousness would secure peculiar advantages to him and his posterity, but that a departure from the true religion would inevitably be followed with an utter desolation of his kingdom, and of the stately edifice he had erected.— It is the most horrid presumption to imagine that we can enjoy the protection or escape the curse of God any otherwise than in a steadfast adherence to His precepts. May the warning produce a holy fear and circumspection in every one of us! “ The Lord is with you, while ye be with Him ; and if ye seek Him, He will be found of you ; but if ye forsake Him, He will forsake you.”†

* 1 Kings ix. 1, &c.

† 2 Chron. xv. 2.

S O L O M O N .

SECT. II.

Solomon erected palaces, and fortified cities—extended his commerce by navigation—frequented the divine service—visited by the queen of Sheba—admired by surrounding nations—declined, through his love of women—supported their idolatries—displeased God—opposed by Jeroboam—probably a penitent—wrote Ecclesiastes, as a warning to others—typified the Redeemer in several respects.

VARIOUS and important are the advantages which attend the practice of piety. It promotes the present as well as eternal happiness of individuals, and brings down the blessing of God upon families and kingdoms. Solomon could testify from his own experience, and the universal history of mankind confirms the observation, that “righteousness exalteth a nation.”*

The reign of this prince was distinguished by its uninterrupted prosperity, so long as he faithfully adhered to the covenant of his God. For many years together, while his wealth and magnificence increased, he was employed in erecting stately palaces and other edifices, for the honour of his majesty, as well as for the purposes of government.† Several strong and for-

* Prov. xiv. 34.

† 1 Kings vii. 1---12. ix. 13. &c. 2 Chron. viii. 1, &c.

tified cities were built in different parts of his dominion, with a view either to utility or grandeur; and the Heathen nations around him became tributary to him. By means of his alliance with the king of Tyre, he acquired the knowledge of navigation, extended his commerce, and imported into his kingdom the riches and commodities of distant lands. Yet, amidst all his splendour, and the necessary attention to state-affairs, he was not unmindful of the divine service. For a long time he continued to frequent the public ordinances, and was found among the most constant worshippers of God.

Years before Christ, about 992. A character so remarkable, placed in such eminence of rank, and possessed of such an uncommon degree of moral excellence and religious zeal, could not fail of attracting the notice and admiration of the neighbouring princes. Many came from afar with valuable presents, that they might be instructed by that wisdom "which God had put into his heart." Among other instances of this kind, the visit of the queen of Sheba has been most minutely recorded.* Much she had heard of the reputation, and very highly she had conceived of the extraordinary abilities, of the king of Israel. With an earnest desire, therefore, to consult him upon certain difficulties concerning "the deep things of God," she undertook a long, tedious, and expensive journey. She obtained the wished-for interview, and received from him the most satisfactory information. When she beheld the

* 1 Kings x. 1, &c. 2 Chron. ix. 1, &c.

order and the beauty of his institutions, both civil and ecclesiastical, she was constrained to admire his singular attainments, pronounced his attendants happy, and praised God for placing so eminent a prince on the throne of Israel.

Such regard and astonishment did the wisdom of Solomon excite: but, alas! with what neglect and contempt was that exalted personage treated, who is styled "The Wisdom of God!" Some, indeed, were compelled to acknowledge, "Never man spake like this man:" but, among those of rank or reputation in the world, He was accounted no better than a fool or a madman. Thus he himself complains of the general disdain he met with: "The queen of the south shall rise up in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it; for she came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, behold! a greater than Solomon is here."* He is still present with his ministers, and in his ordinances, and promises to instruct all those who lament their ignorance, and desire to be taught of Him. But his offers are still rejected with the utmost scorn. How few listen to the words of his mouth! Is not this the language of thousands, "Depart from us, for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways?"† What pains and expense will men bestow upon the improvement of their understanding, for the common concerns of this life, in order to gain that knowledge, which whatever excellence it may boast of, must soon vanish away! But the smallest pains and expense would be thought too much for the

* Matt. xii. 42.

† Job. xxi. 14.

attainment of that wisdom which has in view the noblest objects, produces the happiest consequences, and alone can direct us to the sure possession of eternal glory. This, then, is the condemnation of many among ourselves, that "light is come into the world, and men love darkness better than light, because their deeds are evil."* "O, that they were wise," that they would "covet earnestly the best gifts," and cry unto God for the illumination of his Spirit!

Years before The king of Israel continued to increase
Christ, about
 984. in power, wealth, and magnificence, the envy and admiration of all the surrounding kingdoms. But at length an awful change in his moral and religious character appeared. As we advance towards the close of his reign, we behold a sad reverse of his former exemplary conduct. We cannot but be affected with distress and horror at the sight, and ask, Where is that knowledge and zeal which raised universal astonishment? "How is the gold become dim! How is the most fine gold changed!" Here, then, we are called to weep over the ruins of that stately edifice, which we have been contemplating in all its glory. Had the temple, which he built, been utterly demolished, till one stone had not been left upon another, the calamitous event would have been nothing in comparison. A far more afflicting scene is now to pass before us—the excellency of Solomon debased by the vile apostacy of his declining years!

From his beginning we expected the most happy conclusion. Some transactions, indeed, may deserve

* John iii. 19.

censure, in the early part of his reign. He had made affinity with Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and taken his daughter to wife; which was, doubtless, a connexion of a dangerous tendency, as it might gradually weaken the strength of his religious principles.* Nor do we represent him as a spotless character in any period of his life. But, on the whole, we have seen him so ardent in the service of God, so uniformly attentive to the duties of his high station, that we were ready to pronounce him the most eminent of his species. Alas! how often are the husbandman's hopes disappointed! How often are the gay and promising appearances of the spring suddenly blasted! And how awfully are our expectations frustrated in the close of this history! "King Solomon loved many strange women (together with the daughter of Pharaoh,) women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines: and his wives turned away his heart. For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father."†

Here we perceive the nature, the origin, and the rapid progress, of his sin. "He loved MANY women." Who does not foresee whither this must lead him? He, who is not satisfied within the limits which God has appointed, will scarcely be contained within any limits whatever. The violence of lust can be over-

* 1 Kings iii. 1.

† 1 Kings xi. 1, &c.

come only by a steady resistance; not by a foolish indulgence, which always increases it. Ah! Solomon, what availed thy wisdom in the art of government, since it did not effectually teach thee to govern thyself? “Thou didst bow thy loins unto women, and by thy body though wast brought into subjection. Thou didst stain thy honour, and pollute thy seed: so that thou broughtest wrath upon thy children, and wast grieved for thy folly.”*

But of what sort were his numerous connexions; “He loved many STRANGE women.” He joined himself to those who were “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel,” and enemies to the true God. This was expressly forbidden by the divine law :† and there are the strongest reasons for such a prohibition. In general, we do not observe that ignorant and ungodly persons are brought over to the ways of God by the influence of good men, who have needlessly formed any close intimacy with them. But universal experience testifies that “evil communications corrupt good manners.” The severest piety will scarcely be proof against the continual solicitations to which it must be exposed by such alliances as these. How difficult is it not to comply with those we love! And in how many instances, which we have known, has this solemn admonition been verified, “They will turn away your hearts!”

Solomon, probably, little thought of advancing so far as to practise or countenance the stupid idolatry

* *Eccles.* xlvii. 19, 20.

† *Exod.* xxxiv. 16.—*Deut.* vii. 3.

of his wives, and might conclude that his superior understanding would be a sufficient security to him. But one sin paves the way for another; and especially, when the reins are given to our lusts, who can tell where we shall stop, or what will be the consequence? We behold even Solomon admitting and supporting the worship of false gods in his kingdom. He, who had built a most magnificent house for the God of Israel, erected temples for the gods of the Heathen, and, it should seem, attended at their sacrifices, and bowed before their altars.

What shall we say to these things? We stand amazed and confounded, and know not what to answer. Ah! what fears does this case excite in the heart of the humble Christian! Will not such an one cry out, "Lord, how is it that I am kept, if he, who was raised so high in a religious profession, could not maintain his ground? Or how shall I hope to persevere in righteousness, when I see Solomon, with all his admired abilities, falling into the grossest abominations?"—Here, doubtless, we learn what human nature is, and what continual occasion we have for circumspection and self-abhorrence. So great is our tendency to evil, that it frequently overcomes the most powerful restraints; nor can we conceive the confusion which would ensue, if every barrier were removed. For proofs of this extreme depravity, we need not look to the wilds of Africa or America; we perceive it in the most enlightened nations, we feel the sad symptoms of it within us. The best of men are sensible of much inward corruption, and dread the

thought of being given up to themselves. They are held in with a strong hand, or else there is no folly or madness so excessive, no iniquity so heinous, into which they might not be betrayed. It has pleased God to suffer some of the most eminent characters to be carried away by their own vicious affections, and thereby to show us how far we may depart from Him, if He should forsake us. "Let no man, therefore, glory in men." Let none presume upon any supposed excellence they have attained; but let all fear and tremble for themselves.

There were some peculiar aggravations in Solomon's declension; and these very considerations will teach us to watch and pray.

He was not young when his passions broke out with such violence, and effected the awful change. This came to pass "when he was old," when we should have imagined that the fire of lust had been extinguished. But alas! no age is secure. Not merely young persons, but even those of advanced years, have need to "keep their hearts with all diligence," and to seek protection in the grace of God alone.

We might have thought that his good sense and enlarged intellect would have been a sufficient preservative from the fooleries into which he was led. Many of the meanest capacity, we apprehend, would have abhorred what the wisest of men committed. It will become us, therefore, not to over-rate or envy the most splendid abilities, or the most improved understanding. "Let not the wise man glory in his

wisdom," or forget his dependence upon the God of heaven.

The religious professions of Solomon, and the warnings he had received, greatly enhance his guilt. When we view him bowing among the worshippers of idols, we are ready to ask, Is this he whom David had instructed and exhorted to serve the true God? Is this the pious youth who sought the Lord in Gibeon? Is this the zealous king who had prayed so fervently at the dedication of the temple, and delivered the most excellent precepts to the people? Is this the man with whom Jehovah had vouchsafed to hold the most intimate communications, and whom He had expressly charged to beware of this very sin? Alas! how desperately wicked is the human heart, which can break through the strongest barriers to gratify its beloved lusts! Remember your weakness, though you are ever so strenuous in the cause of truth and righteousness. Depend not on your good education, your supposed firmness in right principles, your envied privileges, comforts, or attainments in religion. All these may fail you in an hour of temptation. Nay, probably your superiority over others may prove a snare to you; as hereby you may be rendered less circumspect, and Satan may be the more desirous to cast you down.

Years before Christ, 975. Are we not anxious to know the issue? Alas! the sun which had risen with uncommon splendour, at last set behind a cloud. Was not Solomon then recovered? We are almost at a loss to answer. His recovery is not expressly declared; and perhaps the less notice is taken of the state in

which he died, that we may be the more afraid of apostacy. His backsliding, which was very offensive to God, brought extreme distress upon himself. "The Lord was angry with him;" and, by an immediate revelation, he testified his displeasure, and his determination to rend a large share of the kingdom from the hands of his successor. Various temporal calamities also im-bittered the decline of his life. Opposition was stirred up against him in different parts of his dominion, through the righteous judgment of God; and he received the painful information that his own servant Jeroboam, by the divine appointment, would shortly rule over ten of the tribes of Israel. His envy and resentment were therefore kindled against Jeroboam: and he sought to kill him: so that, for some time at least, he did not show any proper contrition for his offence, since he quarrelled with his punishment.

Yet it is generally supposed that he died a true penitent. It is presumed, that One, who was named "Beloved of the Lord," would not be finally abandoned to the machinations of Satan. It is thought that his very case was foretold, when the Lord said to David, "I will be his Father, and he shall be my son: if he commit iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, and with the stripes of the children of men: but my mercy shall not depart away from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away before thee."*

The strongest proof of his repentance is the book of Ecclesiastes, which was evidently written in his old age, after a long experience of sin and folly. Here he

* 2 Sam. vii. 14, 15.

confesses and deplures his madness ; and, in the character of "The Preacher," warns others by his own example against the inordinate love of present things, and particularly against fleshly lusts, which had brought him to the very gates of hell. Let us seriously attend, then, to this awful case, as described by himself. "Whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them ; I withheld not my heart from any joy ; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour : and this was my portion of all my labour. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do : and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun."* Indulge no longer the vain expectation of obtaining happiness from any sensual gratifications. If the world, with all its advantages, were able to satisfy the soul, and afford real joy, Solomon would have found it so ; for he gave full scope to his desires, and tried every possible scheme of pleasure ; yet he was disappointed in all ; and, for our admonition, he has left this inscription on all earthly enjoyments, "VANITY AND VEXATION OF SPIRIT."

Base as the departure of Solomon was, the grace of God could recover and pardon him. To that grace, which is treasured up in the Saviour, we refer all those who are ready to despond under a sense of their aggravated guilt. Far as you have wandered from God, and faithless as you have been to your solemn vows and engagements, "Return, ye backsliding children, and the Lord will heal your backsliding." But let none

* Eccles. ii. 10, 11.

derive encouragement, from the mercy or the faithfulness of God, to continue in sin. Say not, while you are indulging every vile affection. "We shall infallibly be saved, because we have once known the Lord; and he will not suffer one of his sheep to perish." Your confidence is grounded on a sad perversion of an acknowledged truth, and is therefore a dangerous presumption. You may be deceived in your opinion of yourselves; and you may have deceived others by your religious professions. Suspect your boasted experience. Many, who were utterly unsound, have seemed for a season to make considerable progress in piety. Search and try your hearts; and, whatever has been your former state, "Do the first works: Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin."

We cannot conclude our account of Solomon without adverting to the more glorious Personage whom he typified in a very eminent manner. The New Testament declares that One greater than Solomon is come to reign over us, and to possess the throne of his father David. May we not see something of His excellency faintly represented to us in this figure?

The Saviour was, in a more exalted sense, the Child of promise; and, by express direction from Heaven, He received an appellation, which implies he was "chosen of God, and precious." He also was consecrated to the regal office; and, like the king of Israel, though He be ready to spare, He will finally execute and destroy every obstinate rebel against his government. He cannot be imposed on by any specious

tales, but most accurately discerns between different characters, even as Solomon distinguished the real from the pretended mother: "An hypocrite shall not come before Him." Let us not dare, then, to put on a counterfeit appearance of piety. The remarkable tranquillity as well as equity of Solomon's reign pre-figured that of the Redeemer. He is, in the highest sense, "The Prince of peace:" and happy indeed are his faithful subjects, who, under his protection, "dwell safely, and are quiet from fear of evil." He says to us, "Come unto me, and ye shall find rest unto your souls."

David's immediate successor was appointed, in an especial manner, to build the temple of the Lord. Therein also we perceive a representation of that infinitely more important work, which is committed to the Son of God. Concerning Him, too, we understand the prophecy, "He shall build an house for my name."* This spiritual edifice rises from age to age, under his care; and, whatever opposition be made, it shall receive continual increase. "He shall bring forth the headstone thereof with shoutings, crying, Grace, grace unto it! He has laid the foundation, and His hands shall finish it."† How great the honour of having a place in it! Happy those, who, "as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, for an habitation of God through the Spirit."‡ He calls upon us to assist in the arduous undertaking. Let us exert our abilities, consecrate all that we have to this service, and account ourselves highly favoured in contributing to

* 2 Sam. vii. 13. † Zech. iv. 7, 9. ‡ 1 Pet. ii. 5. Eph. ii. 22.

promote the glorious plan. Who is there among us, then, who "will build in the house of the Lord!"

The most prominent feature in Solomon's character, we have seen, was his wisdom; and here again we discover the similitude of Him, "in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."* This wisdom He possesses without any limits, and displays throughout the administration of his government: a measure of it, also, He imparts to all his people. Let us attend to his solemn address: "Unto you, O men, I call; and my voice is to the sons of man. O ye simple, understand wisdom: and, ye fools, be ye of an understanding heart.—Blessed is the man that heareth me, watcheth daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. For whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the Lord. But he that sinneth against me wrongeth his own soul: all they that hate me love death."†

Multitudes, even of the most distinguished rank, resorted to Solomon. But, alas! this is not, as yet, fully exemplified in Jesus. He has hitherto been "despised and rejected of men." His glory, however, shall soon appear; and then "even the rich among the people shall entreat his favour."‡ "All from Sheba shall come: they shall bring gold and incense; and they shall show forth the praises of the Lord."|| May the Lord hasten it in his time! May the glory of the Saviour be revealed, and all flesh see it together! Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed be the King of Israel, that cometh in the name of the Lord! Amen.

* Col. ii. 3.

† Prov. viii. 4, 5, 34—36.

‡ Psal. xlv. 12.

|| Isa. lx. 6.

A H A B.

CHAP. VI.

Ahab, an abandoned character—an idolater—instigated by his queen, Jezebel—threatened by Elijah—persecuted him—consented to the massacre of Baal's priests—delivered from the famine—reproached for his conduct to Ben-hadad—coveted and seized on Naboth's vineyard—met by Elijah—condemned—reprieved, on his humiliation—hated and imprisoned Micaiah—wounded in battle—died.

THE sacred records, which were designed to preserve the history of the church, relate chiefly to those who were “redeemed to God from the earth.” But others of a different description are occasionally brought before us; and they demand our serious attention. Doubtless we may derive much profitable instruction from the most abandoned as well as from the most excellent characters. The former represent our nature in a state of awful degeneracy, and call us to humiliation, penitence, and prayer. The latter exhibit a more pleasing view, but they afford us no more cause of boasting than the others; for they prove only what the grace of God has done for our fallen race.

A sinner of peculiar infamy, depraved beyond the common measure of his species, is now proposed to our consideration. “There was none like unto Ahab,

who did sell himself to work wickedness in the sight of the Lord."* May the odiousness of his name deter us from the most distant imitation of his example!

After the death of Solomon, the kingdom was divided into two parts, according to the divine threatening. Ten of the tribes of Israel revolted from Rehoboam the son of Solomon, formed themselves into a separate government under the conduct of Jeroboam, and were never more subject to the house of David. Upon this revolution, also, they forsook the worship of the true God, and, probably from political motives, established idolatry as the national religion. Jeroboam, their new leader, to prevent them from going up to the temple-service, and to detach them more entirely from the kings of Judah, commanded them to attend at Dan and Beth-el, and to bow before the golden calves, which he had there set up. The bad effects of the change very soon appeared. The people almost universally apostatized from God, and their princes were altogether vile and abominable.

Ahab was the seventh in succession; and during those several reigns the nation made a continual progress in sin. No other consequence can be expected when men forsake God, and are given up to their own ways. One ruler of Israel after another was destroyed by the just judgment of an angry God; yet those who followed laid it not to heart. It seemed that each resolved to tread in the steps of him who had gone before, or rather, if possible, to exceed him

* 1 Kings xxi. 25.

in wickedness. Such was Omri, the father of Ahab, who "wrought evil in the eyes of the Lord, and did worse than all that were before him."* What, then, could be looked for from the son of so abandoned a father? We have known, indeed, instances of real and eminent piety among the descendants of profane parents. But such is the influence of education, such the evil tendency of human nature, that children are prone to imitate bad examples, and very apt in learning the corrupt practices of their teachers, unless the grace of God interpose to prevent it. We do not wonder, therefore, when we read that "Ahab, the son of Omri, did evil in the sight of the Lord above all that were before him, and did more to provoke the Lord God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him."† What extensive mischief, then, may follow from the neglect of your offspring! If they perceive in you an avowed contempt of God and his worship, it is probable that they will be at least as zealous in the cause of wickedness and infidelity as yourselves; and the ruinous effects may spread from age to age.

Young people, however, must not screen themselves behind the authority of their parents; for they shall answer for their own iniquity. Their connexions may expose them to peculiar dangers and temptations, but do not furnish them with an excuse for sin. Let Ahab warn them of the sad consequences of imitating the profaneness of their nearest friends or progenitors.

* 1 Kings xvi. 25.

† 30, 33.

Years before Christ, 919. This impious prince was no sooner in possession of the government, than he showed himself a decided opposer of true religion. He not only cast off all regard to the service of Jehovah, but went further than any of his predecessors, inasmuch as he introduced the detestable rites of the Heathens, and erected a temple for Baal. Some part of his zeal in this business we are to ascribe to the alliance which he had formed. He married Jezebel, the daughter of an idolatrous king, a woman of a fierce, persecuting, and abandoned disposition: and it should seem, that, in compliment to his queen, or influenced by her instigations, he committed some atrocious crimes, which, bad as he was, he would not otherwise have done. On her account, probably, he became an advocate for Baal, and hunted the Lord's prophets to destroy them.

Alas! how frequently does the dear partner, who should be the counsellor and favourer of every thing good and virtuous, prove a tempter and a seducer! How many have given up their principles to please their wives! This thought, surely, should engage the attention of our younger readers. Your future character and conduct, perhaps your eternal state, may depend on your choice of the companion to whom you are to be united for life. Beware, lest a regard to worldly prospects, your ill-directed fancy, or the solicitations of your lust, draw you into such connexions as may, in the issue, be fatal to your souls. Suppose not that you can withstand every enticement to evil, while you see how many have been overcome; nor

imagine that you shall convert her to the cause of truth who is yet an enemy to it; but rather fear lest your own minds should be more and more corrupted; for how can you expect the blessing of God, if you act in contradiction to His will and command? Is it less dangerous for you, than it was for the Jews of old, to be thus joined with unbelievers? Or is your religion of less value than theirs, that you are not so much concerned to maintain it?

The Lord is patient and long-suffering; but in the misery which sin occasions, even here, we perceive an evident token of his displeasure against it. The Prophet Elijah, whose ministry had been despised and opposed, was sent to denounce the judgment of God against the king for his impiety; and accordingly a long drought and famine reduced the whole country to the utmost extremity.* Ahab himself felt the distress, but was not humbled by it. He still persisted in his idolatry, and hated, and persecuted with murderous rage, the faithful messenger of Heaven. He continued to patronise and support above eight hundred priests of Baal, and suffered the prophets of Jehovah (except a hundred, whom good Obadiah concealed) to be put to the sword at the instigation of Jezebel.

The most calamitous events will not bring men to a right mind: nay, some bold offenders become the more obdurate under the divine corrections. Such is the hardness and impenitence of the human heart, that neither mercies nor judgments will, of themselves, soften or subdue it.

* 1 Kings xvii. and xviii.

————— “ Tho’ woo’d and aw’d,
Bless’d and chastis’d, a flagrant rebel still !”*

How many, like Ahab, have deeply revolted from God! And has He not, in various ways, solicited your return? But, though he has afflicted you in your persons, your families, or your substance, are you not still in league with sin? Is not the spiritual worship of God, and the ministry of his servants, offensive to you? Numerous instances, at least, occur of the very same temper which appeared in the king of Israel.

Ahab had sought for Elijah from one nation to another, it should seem, with a murderous intent; and yet, when the Prophet voluntarily presented himself before him, he had no power to hurt him. He reproached him, indeed, as the troubler of Israel, but stood to hear his faithful reproofs; and, as if he were won over to his side, complied with his requisition, in summoning the priests, and the worshippers of Baal, to a general assembly. There he himself attended; and, when he had beheld Elijah’s decided victory over the advocates of idolatry, probably under the conviction which that victory produced, he consented to the death of four hundred and fifty of those very priests, whom he had introduced and supported.

It is no unusual thing for men of the most abandoned character to be struck with profound awe, and restrained from their vile purposes, by the presence of an eminently pious person. There is a power in real godliness, which commands the reverence of those who

* Dr. Young,

hate it ; and this the proudest sinners often so far feel, as to be unable to carry on their violent opposition against it, while yet no saving change is effected upon them.

Perhaps some good impressions and resolutions, in favour of the true religion, were produced in Ahab's breast by the late occurrence ; and for the time he might have intended to banish idolatry. It might be, also, with a design to put his sincerity to the test, that the Lord spared him, and delivered him from the oppression of the famine. Those, who are furthest from God, probably have intervals of serious reflection, especially under the painful visitations of Providence, or the solemn admonitions of a preacher, which may constrain them to form schemes of amendment. This has been the case of thousands, who have perished in their sins : we should, therefore, be warned from them not to trifle with our convictions. Our afflictions may be removed, as were those of Ahab, on purpose to try us. O let us seize the convenient opportunity, and prove that we are in earnest " to flee from the wrath to come."

What, then, was the effect with Ahab? He reported those remarkable transactions, which he had himself beheld upon Mount Carmel, to his queen Jezebel :* and this might be done with no ill design. But her rage was excited when she heard that her favourite priests were destroyed ; and immediately she vowed to take vengeance on Elijah : nor did Ahab, as he ought, resist her wicked proposal, or defend the Prophet of Jehovah.—There are those, also, among

* 1 Kings xix. 1, &c.

ourselves, who, with a full persuasion of the truth of the Gospel, are afraid or ashamed to stand up in its vindication, and who therefore tamely acquiesce in the violent schemes of its opposers. What base cowardice and treachery is this! In such a cause, it is not sufficient, nor is it possible, to remain neuter. For thus the Saviour has determined, "He that is not with me is against me."*

Years before Christ, 901. Ahab was not properly affected by the divine mercy in the removal of the famine; nor was any reformation produced in him or his people. We might, therefore, have expected that some heavier judgment would have been inflicted, and the protection of God entirely withdrawn from them. But, though impenitent, they were still favoured. A very formidable attack of Ben-hadad, the king of Syria, threw them into the utmost consternation, and threatened them with instant destruction.† Yet Israel obtained a very signal deliverance: again and again their insulting foes were overcome; not by their good management, but by the gracious appointment of Heaven. The victory, indeed, was granted; not so much out of kindness to Ahab or his subjects, as to secure the divine glory in the punishment of the Syrian king, who had blasphemed the God of Israel.—It is not uncommon for one wicked man to be the instrument of chastising another. Sinners, you may be spared and protected by the providence of God, in preference to some not more abandoned than yourselves. A longer time of trial may be allowed you: but depend not on your present

* Matt. xii. 30.

† 1 Kings xx. 1, &c.

ease and prosperity ; for destruction may still be near, even at the doors. Or, what will it avail you that your life be protracted, if you lengthen out your days in iniquity ?

Ben-hadad was delivered into Ahab's power, for the express purpose of being made an example of justice. Ahab, however, neglected his commission, and, through a sinful lenity, not only permitted the insolent offender to escape, but treated him as his brother, and entered into a foolish covenant with him. This conduct was highly offensive to God, who, therefore, sent by a Prophet to reprove and to threaten him for his disobedience ; assuring him that he must soon lose his own life, in lieu of the criminal whom he had spared.— We are not at liberty, in any case, to consult the maxims of pride or worldly prudence ; nay, it may frequently be dangerous to listen to the dictates of compassion : in every minute particular, the will of the Lord should direct our plans.

The triumph of the king of Israel was suddenly turned into gloom by this solemn reprehension ; but he still retained the same unhumbled spirit, even under the rebuke of Heaven. Instead of imploring forgiveness, “ he went to his house heavy and displeased,” full of enmity against God and his Prophet. The influence of divine grace will dispose us to justify the sentence by which we are condemned. But “ the haughtiness of man” is unwilling to bow before God ; and therefore sinners are inclined to vindicate themselves, to be sullen and angry, and to quarrel with the declarations of God against them. Who can acquit himself in this

matter? Have you not been forward to accuse your Judge, when you ought to have taken shame to yourselves? Have you not complained of the strictness and severity of His law? And, when a faithful application has been made to your consciences by the ministers of Christ, has not the effect been the same as with Ahab? Have you not "gone to your house heavy and displeased?"

Shall we, then, envy the monarch upon his throne? He had obtained a signal victory; but the wrath of God was kindled against him. He possessed a kingdom; but his own furious and vile passions rendered him extremely wretched. As if his whole dominion could not satisfy his desires, he fixed his eye upon a small vineyard, which he coveted as an addition to his garden.* But this was the paternal inheritance of another person, Naboth, who, it should seem, from a conscientious regard to the law of God,† refused on any terms to relinquish that which descended to him from his ancestors, and which was entailed upon his family. A refusal from his own subject the haughty prince could not bear; and merely because he could not obtain the accession he had longed for, being filled with rage and anguish he gave himself up to a sullen despondency.

What a striking picture does this exhibit of the sin, the danger, and the misery, of an envious, proud, and avaricious disposition! "Be content with such things as ye have."‡ Some little enlargement of your income or your estate, you suppose, would quite satisfy

* 1 Kings xxi. 1, &c. † Lev. xxv. 23. ‡ Heb. xiii. 5.

you. No: you deceive yourselves: something else would then be wanted. The rich and the powerful are as far from the summit of their wishes as the most indigent. If you had Ahab's property, with Ahab's temper, you would be truly wretched. Why should you not be satisfied as you now are? Only pray that you may enjoy the love and blessing of God with your possessions, and you will find "a little that a righteous man hath is better than the riches of many wicked."*

It rarely happens that a person of a discontented malignant spirit is not hurried away into schemes of villany, to accomplish his object. Satan, probably, or some of his agents, will furnish a plan, if you be disposed to follow it. The infamous queen, Jezebel, contrived and effected the destruction of Naboth by the basest perfidy, that she might gratify the desire of the king. Ahab, indeed, did not appear in that transaction; but he plainly consented to it, and immediately seized upon the inheritance of his murdered subject. Although his wife might be the more obdurate offender, he himself was destitute of every good principle, and ready to comply with her iniquitous projects. The first proposer of a crime is, doubtless, the most culpable; but he who cheerfully joins as an accomplice shall bear his own sin. Nay, even he who only approves the wickedness of another, and is willing to reap the advantage, is chargeable with a degree of guilt which admits of no excuse.

* Psal, xxxvii. 16.

And what is the fruit of unjust gain? Does it give peace to the possessors, or answer their expectations? What was Ahab the better for his much-coveted vineyard? If he were deaf to the reproofs of conscience, he was made to hear the sentence of God from the mouth of Elijah, who arrested him upon the very spot, and in the act of seizing the paternal estate of Naboth. The appearance of the Prophet on such an occasion excited in him the most painful feelings, and quite confounded him. Being instantly struck with terror, as if he read his doom in the countenance of the man of God, he cried out, "Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" Alas! what could he look for but an enemy in the minister of Jehovah! Elijah charged upon him the impious transaction of Naboth's murder, and predicted that he and his queen, and all his family, would shortly be cut off by violence.

How certainly does misery attend the commission of iniquity! And how vain are the hopes which sinners entertain of secrecy and impunity! "Be sure your sin will find you out." God is privy to all your purposes, and sooner or later will overwhelm you with consternation at the sight of your own wickedness. It will be well if the denunciations of vengeance drive you to repentance, that you may avoid the indignation which is ready to fall upon you.

Was Ahab, then, a penitent? We might have supposed so, at the first appearance. When he heard his awful condemnation, "he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted, and lay in sackcloth, and went softly." Doubtless he was alarmed;

and by such a conduct he made an open confession of his sin. But, whatever horrors of mind he felt, he experienced no real contrition, no abiding change, as the sequel of the history will prove. Yet even this external humiliation procured him some temporal advantages. The Lord expressed a favourable notice of it, and declared that the judgments should be awhile delayed. The offender was reprieved, but not pardoned. A further trial was granted him : but the forbearance of God produced not its proper effects.

How astonishing is the divine patience toward those who remain impenitent ! The Lord will regard the beginning, or even the outward signs, of conversion, rather than appear unwilling to receive a returning sinner. Where professions of sorrow are made, he is often pleased to stay or to withdraw his hand from taking vengeance. Let us, therefore, bow at his footstool, and confess our guilt before him. But "be not deceived ? He is not mocked." No fair show in the sight of men can impose upon him. You may be terrified at death, and, under the dread of damnation, may cry for mercy. You may assume the garb and the language of penitents, and yet continue in love and in league with sin. Are there not those who lately expressed great distress, and an earnest desire of amendment, in the time of sickness ? And now when they are restored to health, and again put to the trial, is not the warning forgotten ? Are not all their resolutions broken ? They do not, at least, with the same fervour implore forgiveness ; but, like Ahab, when they feel the rod removed, return to their former ob-

duracy. What, then, will be the issue? What, indeed, can be expected? Let us attend to the close of this wicked life, which exhibits the dissembler dying at last in contempt of God, and by his righteous judgment.

Years before In conjunction with Jehoshaphat, who had Christ, 897. formed an alliance with him, he prepared for war against Syria.* At the instance of Jehoshaphat, he pretended to consult the Lord; but he called only for his idolatrous priests, whose approbation was easily obtained. Their compliant answers, however, did not satisfy Jehoshaphat, who wished for a Prophet of Jehovah; and then Ahab observed, that there was a man of that character, Micaiah, whom he hated for his tremendous denunciations. We do not wonder at such a declaration. The ministers of God cannot expect the love and favour of those whom they are constrained to warn and reprove. The preachers of the Gospel must proclaim the terrors of the Lord without reserve, and it is probable that on this ground many of their hearers will quarrel with them. It is true, sinners, they cannot "prophecy good concerning you, but evil." And should you therefore hate them, as Ahab did Micaiah? Rather hate and renounce your iniquity; and they will bring you a different message.

We admire the courage and fidelity of Micaiah, who, at the hazard of his life, rebuked the king of Israel, and foretold his speedy destruction in the proposed expedition against the Syrians. Provoked by this bold

* 1 Kings xxii. 2, &c.

address, the haughty prince cast him into prison, and as in defiance of Jehovah and his Prophet, rushed into the battle. Such an avowed opposition to the voice of God and his ministers is indeed an awful sign. We fear for those who will not listen to admonitions ; for "he that being often reprov'd hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy."*

Ahab had probably become more obdurate through his late reprieve, and promised himself a longer reign in his sins ; and yet, as if he had some dread of the threatened danger, he disguised himself in the habit of a private soldier, and put on a coat of mail. But, though concealed from the observations of his enemies, the hand of God found him out. He was wounded by an arrow, shot "at a venture," but directed by unerring wisdom ; and wounded in the very part where he alone was vulnerable, "between the joints of the harness." He felt the approach of death, yet gave no signs of repentance, and expired the same evening. According to Elijah's prediction, the dogs licked up his blood ; and the whole family was soon afterwards extirpated.

What a solemn narrative is this ! O that it might have its proper effect upon careless sinners ! You flatter yourselves, like Ahab, that the menaces of God will not be fulfilled : you hope to escape his judgment : but, with all your contrivances, you cannot fly from it. A more awful destruction than that of Ahab in the battle is prepared for you. Still you rush on, and,

* Prov. xxix. 1.

in spite of every warning, presume that you shall not perish. You are enraged with those who foretel your ruin : but they must continue to declare, " O wicked man, thou shalt surely die."* And soon " shall the right-aiming thunderbolts go abroad, and from the clouds, as from a well-drawn bow, shall they fly to the mark."†

Some, we trust, from an apprehension of danger and a belief of the Gospel, are seeking by humiliation and prayer to obtain deliverance. " Turn ye to the strong hold, ye prisoners of hope."‡ Jesus will graciously receive you, and secure you from the storms of impending wrath. If you fly to him for refuge, you shall never be confounded. When the destroying Angel shall go forth, and slay an innumerable company, you shall have a mark in your foreheads, which will effectually preserve you : and you shall enter into the joy of your Lord for ever.

* Ezek. xxxiii. 8. † Wisd. v. 12. ‡ Zech. ix. 12.

JEHOSHAPHAT.

CHAP. VII.

Jehoshaphat, his excellent character—his attention to his kingdom—prospered under the divine blessing—joined affinity with Ahab—the bad consequences of that alliance—reproved and threatened—renewed his endeavours for the public good—miraculously delivered from confederate enemies—destroyed idolatry—again and again associated with the court of Israel—suffered for it.

WE have beheld with grief the low state of religion in the kingdom of Israel, and the awful departure both of the princes and the people from the Lord God of their fathers. We now turn our eyes to the other part of the land, and observe the posture of affairs in the kingdom of Judah. Here a more agreeable prospect opens upon us. Great corruptions, indeed, both in worship and in morals, prevailed. But it pleased God to raise up many pious rulers from the family of David (in which, according to the promise, the succession to the throne of Judah was continued without interruption); and these, by a zealous exertion of their power, were the means of reviving the true knowledge and fear of God among their subjects.

The character now proposed to us belongs to this description, and stands eminently distinguished in the

sacred history. He was the son of the good King Asa, and doubtless he owed much to the example and instructions of such a father. O that the children of godly parents were duly sensible of their peculiar advantages, and anxious to improve them, as they ought, to the best purposes!

Years before Jehoshaphat, who was the fourth in lineal Christ, 914. descent from Solomon, came to the crown at the time that Ahab reigned over Israel. For twenty-five years the nation enjoyed the blessing of his wise and upright government; and by his pious exhortations, as well as holy practice, they were taught and encouraged to walk in the way of righteousness. How excellent, how lovely, is true religion! From the view of such a character, may we be excited to imitate what we are constrained to admire?

Immediately upon his accession, he discovered a prudent regard to the safety of his dominions, and put them in a proper posture of defence.* But he was chiefly solicitous to promote the honour of God, and the spiritual interests of the people. He abhorred the corruptions of the neighbouring kingdom, and set himself to correct the abuses which obtained among his own subjects. He not only avowed himself the servant of Jehovah, but manifested a peculiar zeal, courage, and delight, in his obedience to him. Grieved for the ignorance and profaneness which had spread throughout the land, he took the most effectual method to obviate and remove them; for he sent priests and Levites, accompanied by some of the principal officers

* 2 Chron. xvii. 1, &c.

of his court, to publish and explain the divine law from city to city. Thus the piety of the church and the power of the state were united and exerted for the noblest purposes. The king of Judah, then, in his religious fervour, resembled his illustrious ancestor David, whose conduct, it should seem, in the best parts of it, he proposed for his own imitation.

Great were the advantages which resulted to Jehoshaphat in particular, and to the nation at large. He soon became a prosperous, rich and potent prince, and saw his subjects around him secure, peaceable, and happy. He was recompensed with the presence and the blessing of that God whom he served : "The Lord was with him;" and to this cause we are taught to ascribe the affluence, the honour, the strength, and the tranquillity, which he enjoyed. The sacred history requires us to acknowledge the hand of God in every event. "Not a sparrow falls to the ground without Him." This is but little regarded; for are not the laws of nature, or those unmeaning terms, fortune and chance, substituted in the place of the divine Providence? And is not Jehovah nearly excluded by us from the government of his own world? He is not sought to for success; and the praise of it is not given to Him, but to human diligence, foresight, or good management: or, if there be no pretence to any of these, it is referred to some lucky hit, of which no account can be rendered. O, sinners, we warn you not to presume upon your abilities, nor to suppose that your schemes will certainly prosper, notwithstanding your contempt of religion. The God of heaven, whom you

set at nought, may instantly defeat your best-concerted plans, and turn them to confusion.

How wonderful is the dominion which he exercises over us! He disposes of all our concerns according to his own pleasure; but his interposition is not usually visible. He governs all our hearts, and accomplishes his purposes, chiefly by this secret influence. Yet we are free; for we act agreeably to our own views, desires, and passions. This powerful access which God has to the human mind, mysterious as it is, must be confessed in the history before us. Jehoshaphat "had riches and honour in abundance;" and his subjects were inclined not only to obey him, but to bring him many presents;—because "the Lord stablished the kingdom in his hand." He was not harassed by outward enemies, for they raised no war against him; but, if we would assign the reason, we must look higher than Jehoshaphat, and observe a strong and effectual restraint laid upon those who would otherwise have distressed him: "the fear of the Lord fell upon all the kingdoms round about." Nay, many of them, who seemed most unlikely, made large and voluntary offerings to him; so that his wealth and magnificence were increased exceedingly.

In this instance, then, at least, the beauty and the advantages of real piety will be acknowledged. In every situation it is amiable and useful, but it is especially so when joined with authority. A zeal for truth and righteousness among our governors, and active exertions for the propagation of the Gospel, would produce the most beneficial effects, as tending

to revive the work of God in our land. Nor would this regard to religion be inimical to the temporal interests of the community, or contrary to sound politics. It would not prevent an attention to the security of our dominions. Forts might be built, garrisons established, numerous armies maintained, and large business transacted, as in the realm of Jehoshaphat. A better consideration, however, than that of all human means of protection, is, "The Lord would be our defence; the Holy One of Israel our King."

But not merely are pious rulers an extensive blessing; all lively exemplary Christians are so, as far as their influence can reach. It is incumbent upon us all to employ what talents we have for the honour of God, and the salvation of souls. You are ready to remark, probably, how much good others might do, who possess more power, and how much you yourselves would do, with their abilities. Alas! you know not your own hearts. Why are you not "faithful in that which is little?" Have you set up the worship of God in your houses? Though you preside not, as Jehoshaphat, over a kingdom, is not the charge of a family important? And why should not you instruct your domestics, as he did his subjects, in "the book of the law of the Lord?" But be consistent, as he was: do not recommend one thing, and practice another. Begin therefore with yourselves; "seek to the Lord God of Israel," and then call upon your children and servants to follow your example.

Are you afraid that by such a conduct you shall incur hatred and opposition, and thus injure your temporal

concerns? Be it so; care not for it: you will suffer in a glorious cause, and receive an hundred-fold reward. But your fears may magnify your danger. The Lord will give you as much of the good things of this life as is expedient for you: for "both riches and honour come of Him." We do not exhort you to enter upon a religious course from the mercenary expectation of worldly prosperity: yet the faithful servants of Christ frequently obtain even present advantages, which more than counterbalance all their losses. Of this at least be assured, and it ought to satisfy you, the Lord will be with you, as he was with Jehoshaphat.

Years before Christ, 897. But no human character is perfect: in this eminent prince a sad defect was found. Ah! how mortifying to our pride is the consideration of that strength of depravity, which remains in the most excellent of the earth! Yet Jehoshaphat's offence consisted not in the commission of any gross iniquity. Doubtless he acted in a dishonourable and incongruous manner, if we regard his religious professions. Though he had discovered such amazing firmness in opposing idolatry, he was induced, probably from worldly motives, to form a connexion with idolaters. Strange, indeed, that he should go so contrary to his own principles, and to his general conduct! But every believer feels that within himself which will account for such unsteadiness in others; for he says, "The evil which I would not, that I do."*

* Rom. vii. 19,

Perhaps his riches and his honours were a snare to him. We know, at least, the danger of prosperity, for it usually puffs up the mind, and suggests plans for further exaltation, which are very unfavourable to real piety. "Jehoshaphat joined affinity with Ahab,"* the wicked ruler of Israel. He married his son Jehoram to Athaliah, the daughter of Ahab. Perhaps he did this from absurd maxims of policy; it might be from the expectation of uniting the two kingdoms again under his own posterity. But it was displeasing to God, extremely hurtful to himself, and a mischievous example to his subjects. Alliances of this kind, with such as have no true regard to God, have been fatal to thousands, who once appeared eminent in religion. Little harm may be apprehended from them; for it is generally supposed, at first, that the acquaintance between the two families need not be very intimate. But one thing insensibly leads on to another; and, if you make any advance to conciliate the favour of profane persons, you will probably be drawn into familiarities and compliances with them, which once you would have abhorred.

Intermarriages will naturally produce an intercourse between the parents of the respective parties. Jehoshaphat visited Ahab; and, whilst they were feasting together, the king of Judah consented to join his forces with Ahab, and to accompany him to battle against Syria. He did not, indeed, renounce or conceal his religion in that wicked court; for he advised that they should consult the word of the Lord. But, alas!

* 2 Chron. xviii. 1, &c.

how vain to think of inquiring of God in such a house! Four hundred of the idolatrous priests of Baal were introduced, and Jehoshaphat was compelled to hear their flatteries and their lies. Probably he felt disgust, and therefore desired that Micaiah, the faithful Prophet of Jehovah, might be sent for; but he could have little satisfaction while he saw the man of God and his message derided, and could scarcely speak in his behalf.

You plead, in favour of alliances with worldly persons, that your usefulness may be thereby extended; since you may draw those over to the service of God who are now prejudiced against it. But does not the contrary effect more usually take place? It is not so likely that you will profit them as that they will hurt you. If you cultivate an intimacy with them, you will be led to make sacrifices which your consciences condemn; at least, you must often be silent, when your mouth should be open to bear witness for God. O beware, lest you wound, if not destroy, your souls, in compliment to them!

Prudential motives are alleged; and it is asked, Why should we give up the prospect of great advantage?—It requires no proof, surely, that to violate a plain duty, from a regard to gain, is an avowed rejection of God. But it deserves our notice, that those who embark in any wrong scheme, from lucrative or ambitious views, are generally disappointed.—Jehoshaphat accompanied Ahab to the battle, in direct opposition to the Lord's prophet; and there his life was exposed to the most imminent danger, and rescued

from the assaults of the Syrians only by a miracle. The Lord suffered him to come into the utmost extremity, to convince him of his guilt, and then interposed for his deliverance. While the enemy compassed him about to kill him, "he cried out, and the Lord helped him; and GOD MOVED THEM to depart from him." He was permitted to escape; but what profit had he received from his visit? The Lord, who spared him in mercy, sent a very solemn reproof to him, and a denunciation of wrath, for associating with the ungodly.*—The saints are punished for their misconduct, but not finally destroyed, as the wicked are. And do we not observe, by the awful reprehension and chastisement of this upright and eminent servant of God, that the peculiar sin into which he fell is most hateful and pernicious?

Jehoshaphat returned to his duty, and by a vigilant attention to his proper work, endeavoured to repair the mischief, which his familiarity with Ahab, possibly, produced in the nation. It should seem that a considerable declension had taken place. Alas! how ready are sinners to throw off restraint, when pious rulers or teachers slacken their diligence, and are themselves betrayed into wrong conduct! The king of Judah, then, set himself again to reform his subjects, with the same holy ardour as before. He attended in person to correct abuses, and to deliver instructions. Nor were his labours vain: "He brought back the people to the Lord God of their fathers." The regular and impartial administration of justice, also, through

* 2 Chron. xix. 1, &c.

every part of the land, engaged his serious regard. He appointed judges and officers, and charged them to execute their trust faithfully, as in the presence of God.—How desirable is it to see those, who have declined, effectually recovered, and proving their recovery by a zealous and strict performance of their duty in their different situations of life! Enough remains for each of us to do; especially as much harm may have arisen from our former negligence; and, though we cannot expiate our past iniquity, yet the remembrance of it should excite us to double diligence in the work of God.

The king of Judah, who had been threatened with the divine displeasure, was soon made to know that his safety depended upon God alone, without whose protection he must have been overwhelmed by his confederate enemies. A numerous host of Moabites, Ammonites, and others, invaded his land, and threw him into the utmost consternation.* Then, probably, he felt shame and distress for his sin, as well as dread on account of his danger. But let us observe in him a remarkable pattern of humiliation, faith, and devotion. Though perplexed, he did not lie down in despair, but first “set himself to seek the Lord,” and afterward called upon all his people to do the same. “He proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah; and they gathered themselves out of all the cities to ask help of the Lord.” In this large and solemn assembly the prince himself presided, and, as the mouth of the congregation, prayed aloud unto God before them all, with singular fervour.

* 2 Chron. xx. 1, &c.

Deeply sensible of their entire dependence upon God, the sovereign and omnipotent Disposer of all the kingdoms of the world, he pleaded the Lord's peculiar relation to them, and former mercies bestowed upon them; and then representing their distress, and professing a full reliance upon Him, he entreated his favourable interposition.

“The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy: He will not always chide, neither will he keep his anger for ever.”* Jehoshaphat, therefore, received an answer of peace; for a prophet was immediately commissioned to encourage both the prince and all his subjects, and to assure them that on the very next day, if they would go forth in faith to meet their enemies, they should obtain a complete victory without an engagement. Jehoshaphat believed, worshipped, and praised God. In obedience to the divine mandate, he prepared his people, and exhorted them to trust the Lord, to expect his promised aid, and to extol Him “whose mercy endureth for ever.” He himself led them out to the field, whither they advanced with hymns of loud thanksgivings to God, as if shouting for the conquest. In an instant the combined armies were confounded, and, like persons seized with a phrensy, they destroyed each other. Was there ever a more exemplary proof of the efficacy of prayer and faith in God? How visible was his interposition in behalf of his servants, who had only to “stand still, and see his salvation!” To Him, therefore, the glory was devoutly ascribed; for the men of

* Psal. ciii. 8, 9.

Judah, conducted by their prince, returned as they went, with songs of joy, confessing that "the Lord had made them to rejoice over their enemies." The hand of God appeared so manifestly in this event, that all the surrounding nations, being struck with awe, no more dared to repeat their hostilities. To the divine influence, then, exerted upon the minds of his adversaries, and not to his own wisdom or courage, Jehoshaphat was indebted for the quiet which he afterwards enjoyed.

How singular is the whole of this transaction! How instructive a pattern do we behold in the pious king of Judah! Backsliders, who are punished for their offences, may be encouraged from him to renew their application to the throne of grace, and maintain their hope in God. You may be brought into so great perils, that an escape may seem impossible; but when, like Jehoshaphat, you "know not what to do," lift up your eyes to the Father of all mercies, and wait for His salvation. Only come with unfeigned penitence, and rest with composure and firmness on His promises for help. Go forth with joy and confidence in Him, and believe that it will be as he hath said. You shall not be disappointed; for, when you find no refuge, He will display his power, faithfulness, and love, on your behalf.

How glorious, then, does our God appear! "His compassions fail not."—"Come, and let us return unto the Lord: for He hath torn, and He will heal us; He hath smitten, and he will bind us up." "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven

and earth.”* In our deepest distresses and most imminent dangers, when all visible means of safety are removed, we will trust in Him, and not be afraid. For, “behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear.”† Faith grounds its expectation, not on human probabilities, but on the declarations of Jehovah: and it should be remembered that the most remarkable deliverances of the church have been effected, either without the aid of men, or with such as in itself would be weak and contemptible. Thus it is undeniable that “salvation is of the Lord;” and hereby he secures the whole glory to Himself.

What though your enemies be strong and furious: they are all under his control, and He will repress their violence as He pleases, to fulfil his own purposes. “Surely the wrath of man shall praise Thee; the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain.”‡ If, then, we enjoy peace and comfort in our nation, our neighbourhood, or our families, we know to whom we are indebted; and we praise our God, who has given us this rest.

Jehoshaphat continued, as a wise and pious ruler to enforce among his subjects an attention to the service and an obedience to the law of God. Doubtless he was extensively useful; but, though he did much, he could not do all that he desired. He had destroyed idolatry, and put away the Sodomites, and other abominations, out of the land; but the people could not

* Lam. iii. 22. Hos. vi. 1. Psal. cxxiv. 8. † Isa. lix. 1,
‡ Psal. lxxvi. 10,

be prevailed on to forsake the high places, where religious rites were performed to the true God. Perhaps he had not courage to correct this irregularity ; or it might not be prudent to attempt it, on account of the extreme degeneracy of the nation. We should not expect every thing from the best of men. Considering the state of human nature, we rejoice in any degree of amendment, and wonder not that no more good is effected. Many difficulties will occur, to impede the progress and full establishment of reformation : but “ arise, and be doing, and the Lord will be with you.” “ Be always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.”

We are again obliged to censure this very excellent king, because the sacred writers have done it. He had been reprov'd and punished for his intimacy with Ahab, and yet he relaps'd, by forming another connexion, in the same irreligious family, with the son and successor of Ahab. Even after that astonishing deliverance which God had wrought for him, and though he had smarted for his late folly, we find him joining in a commercial treaty with Ahaziah, who, like his father was a very profane character. They designed to send a trading fleet, which they had equipped, to the east, and to share the profits. But God, in mercy to Jehoshaphat, blasted the scheme, and frustrated his hopes of gain. His ships were destroyed in the port ; and a Prophet of Jehovah declared that this was appointed as a chastisement for his attachment to that wicked house. Thus the alliance was broken : and the divine

rebuke had its proper effect, at least for the season, for, though urged by the king of Israel, he peremptorily refused to renew the compact.*—If we have departed from God, and be recovered even by the severest corrections, let us be thankful for any losses, which may have prevented the loss of our immortal souls: let us praise the Lord, who sought after us, and left us not to perish in our sins.

But how strong is the tendency of our nature to evil! How prone are the most holy men to yield to those very corruptions which they seem to have renounced and overcome! Some time after the last transaction, we find Jehoshaphat once more in confederacy with the profane court of Israel, and joining in a warlike expedition with Jehoram, as he had done with Ahab.† Here again he was reduced to extreme difficulties, and rescued as before by the Lord's interposition. Doubtless he maintained his integrity to the end; but we see his weakness, and tremble for ourselves. He was, probably, of an easy compliant humour, and unwilling to disoblige his friends. The first wrong step was his taking a wife for his son from such a family, as this paved the way for all the subsequent mischiefs. If induced to it by the prospect of advantage, he was utterly disappointed. Much he suffered in his own person, and many calamities happened to his descendants in consequence of this affinity. His immediate successor, Jehoram, who married Ahab's daughter, proved a detestable character: that wicked woman

* 1 Kings xxii. 49.

† 2 Kings iii. 7, &c.

attempted to extirpate all his posterity; and one child only was preserved, in a wonderful manner.*

Ah! what complicated miseries follow from what may seem a trifling instance of misconduct! Believers, think not yourselves secure: especially, if you feel a disposition to be kind, beware of a conformity to the world. Your placid temper, which is truly amiable, exposes you to peculiar snares. Consider, at least, what is "the sin which doth so easily beset you." Though you have renounced it, and suppose yourselves free from its assaults, it will continually recur, and solicit fresh indulgence. Your flesh, in one way or another, will maintain the conflict, till you lay down your earthly tabernacles in the dust.

But let not the weakness of Jehoshaphat, or of any other saint, be alleged in justification of those who are entirely "of the flesh, and do mind the things of the flesh." YOUR compliances are not merely occasional, or such as you are unwillingly drawn into by surprise or violence of temptation. They suit your disposition, and constitute your settled rule of conduct. Your case, then, is very different from theirs, who "are not of the world, but chosen out of it." The separation to which they are called is what you would dread as the heaviest misfortune. "Ye adulterers, and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever, therefore, will be a friend of the world, is the enemy of God."†

* 2 Chron. xxi. 6. xxii. 10, &c.

† James iv. 4.

ELIJAH.

CHAP. VIII.—SECT. I.

Elijah, an extraordinary Prophet—warned the Israelites—threatened Ahab with a drought—protected from his rage—fed by ravens—sent to a poor widow at Zarephath—raised her son to life—again reproved Ahab—confounded the worshippers of Baal, and slew the idolatrous priests.

How vain are all worldly pomps and distinctions, however eagerly coveted and pursued! Are they not frequently bestowed on men of the basest character, and withheld from those, who are, decidedly, the favourites of Heaven? We are expressly told that some eminent saints “wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented.” Had we, indeed, been witnesses of all that contempt and variety of distress which they experienced, while “they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth,” we might have concluded against them. But we hear the testimony of an infallible judge, “Of these the world was not worthy;”^{*} they were, of all others, dearest to God, his most

* Heb. xi. 37, 38.

faithful servants, and the brightest ornaments of his church; and very shortly they will appear with peculiar lustre in the kingdom of his glory.

This description, probably, may be applicable to many ancient believers. We know one such instance at least: Elijah, who stands among the foremost in the list of Scripture worthies, is exactly characterized by it.

Next to Moses, perhaps, he is the most extraordinary Prophet whose life is recorded in the Old Testament. There was, indeed, a strong likeness between these two, in various particulars; and they were both selected for the distinguished honour of attending our Lord on the mount of transfiguration: "they appeared in glory, talking with Him, and spake of his decease, which He should accomplish at Jerusalem."*—It will be recollected, also, that a person of great eminence in the New Testament is compared to Elijah. John the Baptist, who was foretold by his very name, is described as a man of the same spirit, of a similar habit and appearance, alike abstemious and abstracted from society, alike firm and undaunted in maintaining the cause of God.† Many important lessons of instruction, doubtless, may be derived from the example before us. But his office and situation were so singular, that, in some circumstances, we allow he cannot properly be proposed as a pattern for exact imitation, so much as a subject of our devout wonder and admiration. Throughout the whole of his most interesting life, we observe him employed as the immediate

* Luke ix. 30, 31. † 2 Kings i. 8. Mal. iv. 5. Matt. iii. 4. xi. 14. xvii. 12. Luke i. 17.

messenger of Heaven, and supported, by a continued series of miracles, under afflictive dispensations of Providence and great violence of persecution. Let us glorify God in him.

He was sent to the rebellious house of Israel, to reprove them for their departure from the Lord, to vindicate the honour of his law, and to restore his service. Though clothed in mean apparel, with what majesty and authority did he speak and act! He called sinners to repentance, rebuking and exhorting; and, without dreading the wrath of the king, he denounced, and even executed, the judgments of God against him and his subjects. We admire the patience and mercy of our God in visiting that people, so generally corrupt and abandoned, and in raising up such an one to maintain his truth among them. And do we not praise Him for his goodness in waiting upon us by the ministry of the Gospel, amidst such universal depravity and contempt of Himself? We acknowledge, to the glory of his grace, that He has sent among us many faithful witnesses, whom he has supported and prospered, for the revival of his work, in this sinful and adulterous generation.

Years before Christ, about 910. Elijah is introduced in the sacred history without any mention of his parentage or extraction. In the first account which is given of him, we find him delivering an unwelcome message from the Lord to the king of Israel, and threatening a drought upon the land.* We apprehend that many former warnings had been despised, and that this judg-

* 1 Kings xvii. 1, &c.

ment was inflicted as a punishment, both on the prince and the people, for their rejection of the Prophet. They were taught that he had received his commission from Heaven, when they saw the rain granted or withheld according to his word. The God of nature with uncontrollable authority, rules over all. The various hosts of creatures are at his command; and, when He shall direct, they are ready to go forth as the executioners of his vengeance, to chastise or destroy ungodly sinners. The rain falls not by chance, but by his appointment; and very frequently "He turneth a fruitful land into barrenness, for the wickedness of them that dwell therein." The scornful treatment of his ministers, especially, will be sure to rouse his indignation.

For three years and a half "the heaven was shut up, and great famine was throughout all the land."* It is almost inconceivable how terrible the effects must have been; and yet the people remained impenitent. Ahab, and his queen Jezebel, if not his subjects in general, instead of turning to the Lord with contrition, sought the life of the Prophet, as if he, and not their own guilt, had occasioned their calamities. But he was protected from their rage, and supported by a continued miracle, though he could not but partake of the public distress. The very course of nature was overruled, that his bread might not fail: and yet it pleased God to put his faith and obedience constantly to the trial, and to require the most decisive evidence of his sincerity, in the most difficult circumstances.

* Luke iv. 25.

He commanded him to fly to a considerable distance, and for a time to separate himself from all society, assuring him that a little brook, where he should lie concealed, would furnish him with water, and that the ravens should be commissioned to bring him food. He believed the word, and complied with this extraordinary direction; nor did the promise disappoint him: he drank of the brook, and the birds of prey brought him regular supplies of bread and flesh. In that retired situation, he seemed to be cut off from all public usefulness; but doubtless he enjoyed sweet intercourse with God, and offered up fervent prayer for the conversion of his impenitent country. We perceive and admire the peculiar energy of that faith, which enabled him day after day to expect his maintenance in a way the most improbable. For how strange that the very ravens should act so contrary to their nature as to forego their own indulgence, and minister to the relief of the Prophet!

Are we also ready to go wherever the Lord shall call? Ah! what fears and apprehensions would distract our minds in similar circumstances! But, though the external means of subsistence appear to be at our command, faith was not more necessary for Elijah than it is for us: we should still live, from day to day, dependent upon the God of Providence for our daily bread. Has not He sustained us hitherto in a wonderful manner? Are we not as much indebted to Him for our support as if we had been fed by a miracle? Perhaps we have been assisted by those persons who seemed as unlikely to be kind as the very ravens. In

many instances we have found men of a fierce and greedy disposition, resisting, as it were, the impulse of their nature, renounce their own advantages, and discover an uncommon tenderness and regard towards the despised and persecuted servants of the Lord. Surely this ought to be ascribed to His powerful influence, exerted on the behalf of those whom He has engaged to protect.

After some time the faith of Elijah was tried in a different way. The brook, which had supplied him with water, dried up, and his situation, therefore, became untenable. However, the Lord, who still extended the same care toward him, directed him to go to Zarephath, a town of Phenicia, and assured him that a poor widow of Gentile extraction would support him, though banished from his own country. Many objections might arise in this mind ; but he obeyed the command, and obtained the promised help.—May We possess a similar trust and submission ! For what have we to do but to follow our Guide, though we know not whither He leads us ? If, instead of this unreserved reliance upon Him, we question the propriety of his appointments, and “consult with flesh and blood,” we shall probably be tempted to take a wrong course, and thereby be involved in innumerable difficulties.

When the Prophet reached the end of his journey, the way was prepared for his reception. The very woman whom he sought came out of the city just as he arrived there ; and perhaps it had been intimated to her, that, notwithstanding her distresses, she must

entertain this singular guest. He found her gathering a few sticks, in order to bake her last handful of meal for herself and her son, expecting that they must shortly perish with hunger. Surely he could not ask relief from one in such circumstances. But, having an infallible word to depend on, he entreated her to minister unto him out of her small pittance, and assured her from the Lord that her wants should be supplied, though invisibly. This, doubtless, proved a severe trial to her, and remarkably displayed her faith and piety. She complied with the requisition, and obtained a recompense for her obedience. Long time she and her family, together with the Prophet, were miraculously supported. It might seem to them continually that they were eating their last morsel ; but there still remained secret resources, so that "the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail."

The same kind of interposition may not be granted to us. But why do we inquire, with so much perplexity, "What shall we eat? or what shall we drink?" Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all other things, needful or expedient, shall be added unto you. What means your unbelief? Has God forgotten to be gracious, or violated his word? Does not He still feed the fowls of the air? And, since the fulness of the earth is His, has he not a thousand ways of relieving your necessities?

Do any persons wonder that Elijah was sent to a Sidonian, rather than to any of the families of Israel? Our Lord has taught us, from this very instance, to beware of trusting to our religious privileges, lest

others with inferior advantages should obtain the preference.* We should also fear to despise the ministers of God, lest we be punished by their utter removal. The Gospel itself may be taken from us, and given to another people. For the Lord God acts in a sovereign manner : He bestows and withdraws his favours where and when He pleases.

During Elijah's residence with the widow, her son sickened and died. The poor distressed mother, under deep convictions of her guilt, considered the calamity as a judgment inflicted upon her by the Prophet, and with some impatience desired him to depart, as if she was not able to stand in his presence. This afflictive circumstance seemed at first to stagger his faith. But, in answer to his very fervent prayer, the child revived. Thus the Lord put a fresh and distinguished honour upon him, as well as magnified his own power. Before that time, no such miracle, that we know of, had ever been wrought upon the earth ; and in this view we cannot conceive a more illustrious instance of dependence upon God than that of Elijah. who could ask and confidently expect such an event to take place.

Years before Christ, about 906. Elijah's long continuance at Zarephath, probably, gave him some opportunities of usefulness in that city ; and his retirement might prove a peculiar blessing to himself, and tend to qualify him for more public services. At length the Lord directed him to quit this retreat, and go to the court of Ahab, intimating that He would shortly deliver

* Luke iv, 25,

Israel from the miseries of the famine.* But how should he dare to stand before that impious prince, who, with a murderous rage, had sought him from kingdom to kingdom, that he might destroy him? His courage, however, did not fail, nor did he decline the perilous commission. He went without reluctance, and has thereby furnished us with an example of obedience, zeal, and fidelity, in the prospect of difficulties, dangers, and death.

Upon meeting with the Prophet, Ahab began vehemently to accuse him as the troubler of Israel. But Elijah repelled the charge, and turned it against the king himself. With an uncommon intrepidity, he reproved the furious persecutor, and ascribed all the miseries of the land to that infamous system of idolatry which Ahab and his family had adopted. He also desired him to summon all the priests of Baal, that in their presence, and to their utter confusion, he might evince Jehovah to be the true God, and the only proper object of their worship. It is probable that Ahab had formed some scheme of violence against Elijah; but he relinquished his purpose, and instantly complied with his request.

Upon Mount Carmel, then, where the numerous assembly met together, the important contest was to be decided. In Baal's interest were four hundred and fifty priests, besides the king and many of his subjects. On the part of Jehovah, there was none but Elijah; and yet, though he stood alone, he possessed an unshaken courage, and displayed a peculiar majesty in his deport-

* 1 Kings xviii. 1, &c.

ment. He made his appeal to the people, boldly rebuking them for their wavering mind, and entreating them to acknowledge Him for their God, whose deity should be proved. He proposed, therefore, that a sacrifice should be offered on each side ; and, in firm dependence on the God of heaven, by whose commission he acted, he agreed to rest the cause on this single circumstance, "The God that answereth by fire, let Him be God."

When the idolatrous priests had long waited in vain for Baal's interposition, Elijah, with severest irony, ridiculed their foolish expectations, and then, with a holy fervour, addressed himself to the Lord God of their fathers. He prayed that He would determine the contest, and so manifest his own glory to that nation, that they might be effectually recovered from their apostacy. The answer was immediate : the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the sacrifice : the worshippers of Baal were confounded, and the congregation in general so struck with awe, that they prostrated themselves on the ground, and cried out, "The Lord, He is the God ; The Lord, He is the God." While they were under this strong conviction, Elijah took the opportunity, and, as if he had been possessed of the supreme authority, commanded the idolatrous ministers to be slain, according to the divine law ; and such was the impression produced, that neither the king nor any of the people objected to the measure.

What an honour does God usually bestow upon his faithful servants ! Even in the midst of their bitterest enemies, He is often pleased to wipe away their re-

proach, and make them appear highly respectable. Let none, therefore, fear to obey Him, or to enter on the most arduous duties to which He may call them.

It is our part to go forth at his word, and to look unto Him for strength and protection. The ambassadors of Christ, more especially, should study this example, and they will be animated to a vigorous discharge of their office. Does their place require them to stand before great men? Even there they must declare the truth of God, and boldly rebuke sin, whoever may be offended by it. It will be nothing new, indeed, if they be reviled as the disturbers of society. But to be intimidated in the performance of their work, or to make any mean compliances, through the dread of opposition, is extremely disgraceful to their sacred character. Let them cheerfully commit themselves to Him whom they serve, and probably they will find their difficulties removed in a way they could not have conceived. The proudest persecutors may be constrained to reverence them, to relinquish their schemes of violence against them, and even to grant all their requests. What though the minister of Christ be surrounded by numbers of the great, the honourable, and the learned, who are imbittered against him? He is engaged in a good cause, has a powerful advocate on his side, and therefore may confidently expect a happy issue. The multitudes about him, who are contrary to God and his truth, should not terrify him, but rather increase his ardour. Though he have none to strengthen his hands, let him endeavour, even singly, to stem the torrent of iniquity, and, in deep concern for the pre-

vailing ignorance and wickedness of the world, let him pour out his heart in fervent prayer for the advancement of real piety.

How often has the Lord interposed, to make himself known upon the earth, and to confound the opposers of religion! Surely we should hereby be encouraged to supplicate and expect his gracious exertions for the support of his Gospel in our own day. But where is the zeal of Elijah? Who is ready to "stand in the gap," while profaneness spreads and triumphs through our land? Are not those, who should be the foremost in the great work of reformation, consulting their own ease, their reputation, and present advantages, and tamely conforming to the vices of the times, rather than manfully reprov- ing them?—May God pour out his Spirit upon all those who are put into the ministry, and make them like-minded with this holy Prophet, firm and disinterested, bold and vigorous; that by their means He may establish righteousness in the earth, and subdue sinners to the obedience of faith!

E L I J A H.

SECT. II.

Elijah obtained rain by prayer—fled for his life—wished to die—had a singular revelation at Horeb—anoointed Elisha—pronounced sentence upon Ahab in Naboth's vineyard—reproved Ahaziah's servants—called down fire from heaven—visited the schools of the prophets—divided Jordan—was taken up to heaven.

MISERY has been invariably the fruit of sin. A righteous God, jealous for the honour of his law, chastises nations as well as individuals. But He is ready to sheath the sword of his justice, when the most heinous offenders even seem to return to Him with repentance. The ministers of his word will rejoice to promote this event, and will therefore be importunate in their addresses to Heaven for the people of their charge. Such are the reflections which arise from this part of the very singular history of Elijah.

Years before Christ, 906. The kingdom had been long afflicted by a famine, through the visitation of an angry God, for their rejection of the true religion. But at length the Israelites consented to put away their idolatry, when they saw the priests of Baal utterly confounded by the Prophet of Jehovah. Immediately the

* 1 Kings xviii.

Lord intimated his design of removing their calamity; and Elijah, who had declared that the drought should soon be terminated, retired to prayer; for the blessing was to be given in answer to his ardent supplications. He had the most confident expectations of obtaining the wished-for relief; but for some time he perceived no appearance of its approach. He did not cease, however, from his earnest intercession, till the heavens poured down rain, and refreshed the parched ground. From this example we are taught that "the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."* But, like Elijah, we should ask in faith, and continue our petitions till we receive the promised mercy.

Elijah accompanied the king, with all proper deference, upon his return to Jezreel, intending, probably, to prosecute the work of reformation, and hoping that the late miraculous interposition would give him an extensive influence. But no sooner did he arrive there than he heard of the queen's determination to put him to death.† Upon this occasion the firmness of the Prophet failed him; for he betrayed sad symptoms of impatience, cowardice, and unbelief. Hereby he proved that he "was a man subject to like passions as we are," and that the most eminent saints possess neither confidence nor courage, any further than the grace of God upholds them.

We apprehend that he should have stood his ground, in full assurance of the divine protection. But he fled with precipitation and terror, and, leaving his servant

* James v. 16--18.

† 1 Kings xix. 2, &c.

at the extremity of the country, retired without an attendant into the wilderness, where the Israelites had wandered forty years. There, being exhausted with hunger and fatigue, and harassed with murmuring and distrusting thoughts,—concluding, too, that all further attempts to reform that sinful generation would be utterly fruitless,—he requested of God to be dismissed from his office, and from life itself.

What shall we say to this weakness in such an exalted character? His situation, doubtless, was distressing; but he had endured severer trials, and the recollection of former deliverances should have encouraged his hope. Alas! we shall be borne down by the most inconsiderable attack, if we possess no better strength than our own. The steadfastness we have hitherto shown will be no security to us in time to come. In every new danger we are apt to forget our past mercies, and give way to unbelief and despondency. But shall we desert our place or employment, and complain of our existence, merely because some powerful enemy threatens us? The Lord God whom we serve is able to protect and prosper us, in spite of all the machinations which can be formed against us. If he be pleased to continue our lives, we should rejoice to fulfil the part which He has assigned us, whatever we may suffer by it: nor should we be very solicitous to get out of our troubles. There are those who from the noblest principles may “have a desire to depart,” that they may see God as he is, and be made like unto him in holiness. But to be weary of the world because we are afflicted, or to dread the consequences of faithfully dis-

charging our duty, so as to "request for ourselves that we may die," surely this is our infirmity, and highly dishonourable in those who profess to trust in the living God.

The Lord, who compassionates the weakness of his people, appeared to comfort the drooping mind of the Prophet. He, who had before commanded the ravens and the widow to support him, now sent an Angel to provide him food; and by the strength of that meat Elijah remained in the wilderness forty days, like his predecessor Moses, without any further supplies. The Lord has innumerable ways of relieving or preventing the wants of his creatures. "Man doth not live by bread only."* The same hand which made us can sustain us without the intervention of any nutriment at all.

Elijah came at length to Horeb, "the mount of God," which had been signalized by the revelations there delivered to Moses. In that very place it pleased the Lord again to manifest his glorious Majesty, as He had done to his servant of old. The solemn inquiry was proposed to the Prophet by a voice from Heaven, "What doest thou here, Elijah?" He replied, with an appearance of peevishness, in his own justification, that he had stood alone in defence of true religion, that his most zealous exertions had been vain, and that he was flying with imminent peril of his life. He seems not to have been impressed with a proper reverence for the divine authority; and therefore an exhibition of great terror was made to pass before him, that he might

* Deut. viii. 3.

know with what a God he had to do. Immediately a violent wind rent the mountains, and brake the rocks in pieces; the earth shook, and was removed; and a glorious light, by means of a miraculous fire, shone from heaven. By these awful tokens the Lord manifested his power, perhaps his displeasure too. But he displayed his gracious Presence by a still small voice. Thus also He is pleased to reveal himself to us. We praise his condescension and his mercy. We perceive something of his tremendous majesty and fiery indignation in the thunders of his law; but the mild language of the Gospel, wherein he addresses us, dissipates our fears, and emboldens us to approach Him.

Elijah stood with profound veneration before his God; but, when inquired of as at first, perhaps not even then sufficiently humbled, or convinced of his fault in flying from his place, he alleged the very same excuse. Alas! how forward are we to justify ourselves! With what difficulty we are brought to confess our folly and our sin! The Lord, however, sent him forth to his work again, and commissioned him to anoint a king for Syria, a king for Israel, and a Prophet to succeed himself. He encouraged him also with the assurance, that, whatever complaints he might urge against his countrymen, there were seven thousand still left in Israel, who had not conformed to the established idolatry. Much instruction is hereby conveyed to us. These are dark times; and, when we consider the general prevalence of iniquity, and the frequent rejection of the faithful ministers of Christ, perhaps we give way to desponding thoughts. But we ought to believe

and rejoice that there is a remnant among us, “ according to the election of grace,” which is, probably, far greater than we know or can conceive.* But, be the case as it may, it is our part to be active and unwearied in promoting the cause of God, and not to desert our post through timidity or a peevish disgust. Let each one put the question to himself, “ What doest thou here?” Art thou in the place, and diligently employed in the work, appointed for thee? Return, ye backsliders, with shame and humiliation for your departure ; return, with fresh zeal and vigour, to prosecute the duties of your high calling.

Elijah obeyed the heavenly mandate, and executed the commission. Soon afterwards he anointed Elisha to the prophetic office, and found help and comfort in the services of that pious attendant. It is probable that they set themselves together to oppose the general corruptions, to instruct the people in true religion, and to prepare future ministers by superintending the schools of the prophets.

Years before Christ, 899. It appeared that Elijah had recovered all his former intrepidity, when he went agreeably to the command of God, and as His messenger, to reprove the king, and to denounce the divine vengeance against him, for his aggravated guilt in the murder of Naboth.† Intimidated by no fear of danger, he obtruded himself, as a most unwelcome visitant, upon the royal offender, at the very moment of his triumph, when he was taking possession of Naboth’s vineyard : there he pronounced his doom, and predicted the

* Rom. xi. 2--5.

† 1 Kings xxi. 17, &c.

terrible destruction which awaited both his impious queen and the whole of his posterity. The language might seem harsh and insolent ; but, though not wanting in respect to his prince, he regarded a higher authority, and determined “ to obey God rather than men.”—The same firmness of mind should all the ministers of the Gospel maintain. They are often obliged to carry an offensive message ; for they must declare to every presumptuous sinner, without any distinction of rank, as Elijah to Ahab, “ O, wicked man, thou shalt surely die.”* Discourage them not in the discharge of their office. Say not, as the Jews of old, “ Prophecy not unto us right things ; speak unto us smooth things ; prophecy deceits.”† Rather pray for them, that the spirit of Elijah may rest upon them, that they may “ keep back nothing profitable” from their people, nor “ shun to declare unto them all the counsel of God.”‡

Years before On another awful occasion, the Prophet Christ, 896. discovered the same boldness and fidelity in executing the divine commission, even at the hazard of his life.§ When Ahaziah, who then ruled over Israel, had dispatched his servants to consult a Heathen oracle as to the event of his sickness, Elijah met them with a very striking reproof for their contempt of the God of Israel, and foretold the approaching death of their master. This offensive declaration excited the rage of the king against him, who therefore sent an armed company to apprehend him. The soldiers

* Ezek. xxxiii. 8. † Isa. xxx. 10. ‡ Acts xx. 20, 27.
§ 2 Kings i. 2, &c.

went as they were ordered, and required the man of God to surrender himself up to them : nor did he attempt to escape by flight. But it pleased Jehovah to take the matter into his own hand, to vindicate the cause of his despised and persecuted minister, and to give one more signal testimony to that unbelieving nation that He himself is God alone. Elijah, therefore, was moved by immediate inspiration to call down fire from heaven, to consume both the officer and his troop. The tremendous visitation produced no good effect upon the tyrant ; for he still hardened his heart, and, as if he would maintain a contest with Jehovah, presumptuously sent another band of soldiers upon the same errand : and they also perished in the same awful manner. Was he not yet convinced of his impiety ? So far from it, that he dispatched a third company : but the leader of them, intimidated by the former judgments, sued to the Prophet for his life. Elijah, still acting under the divine direction, instantly complied, went as required, and, with an undaunted courage, stood before the king : but even then he declared, as he had done before, the anger of the Lord against him, and the near approach of his dissolution. How the enraged monarch was affected by the presence, the intrepidity, and address of this holy man, we know not : but, probably, he was confounded, his fury turned into terror, and his purpose of violence utterly defeated.

May we not learn, then, to possess an unshaken firmness of mind in the service of our God ? For what have we to fear in the path of duty ? What “ though an host should encamp against us ; ” still

“they that be with us are more than they that be with them.” The Lord Almighty can easily dismay the proudest of our opposers, and restrain their impotent malice. Let us go forth, therefore, in obedience to our exalted Leader, wherever he shall direct, nor decline any office to which he may appoint us. Depending upon him, we may defy the assaults of all our enemies, and triumph in the assurance of salvation. Let us say, then, with the Apostle, “None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy.”*

But let not the conduct of Elijah, in calling down fire on his adversaries, be mistaken or perverted. We cannot suppose that he acted under the influence of cowardice, pride, or revenge. God had determined to make his power known to these idolaters, and therefore instructed the Prophet to pronounce, and, as it were, to execute, the awful sentence of condemnation. The circumstances, doubtless, were extraordinary; and what was done upon an extraordinary occasion, by one divinely commissioned, cannot properly be adduced as a precedent for us. Two of our Lord’s disciples, who betrayed an angry vindictive temper, and wished to consume their opposers by fire, pleaded this instance, but met with a solemn reproof, as not knowing “what manner of spirit they were of.”† The followers of the blessed Jesus should imitate their Master, and desire “not to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.” He has taught us, not by precept only, but by his own illustrious example, to “love our enemies, and do good to them which hate us.”

* Acts xx. 24.

† Luke ix 54, 56,

‡ vi. 27.

The life of this eminent saint was in many respects singular and uncommon, and so was his end. "The Lord would take him up into heaven by a whirlwind."* The time, and probably the mode, of this intended translation, were revealed to him. Yet, though filled with holy meditations upon his approaching change, he remitted not his accustomed diligence, but spent his few remaining hours in an active discharge of his office. He continued to visit the schools of the prophets, going about from one of these seminaries to another, teaching and encouraging the pious youths who were educated in them. Elisha, his attendant and successor, accompanied him in his circuit, and, though entreated to leave him, perhaps that he might not be distressed by the sudden separation, enjoyed the benefits of his conversation and his prayers to the very last. When they came together to the river Jordan, Elijah, by the same miraculous power that Moses and Joshua had exercised, with his mantle smote the waters, which instantly divided, and permitted them to pass through on dry ground. He had just proposed, as a token of his love, to use his influence for the accomplishment of whatever Elisha might request; and then, as they were still going forward, "a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven." Like Enoch, in the antediluvian world, "he was translated, that he should not see death." This was, indeed, a singular honour, designed, doubtless, to testify the divine approbation of that good man, who had been generally

* 2 Kings ii. 1, &c.

despised and insulted, and “ of whom the world was not worthy.” Hereby also the Lord gave a strong confirmation of the doctrines Elijah had taught, a decided proof of a future state, and an encouragement to the few godly persons who were left in the land to persevere in righteousness, however persecuted for it.*

The ministry of Elijah does not appear to have produced any such remarkable change in the nation as we might have expected. But none will doubt that he possessed a high degree of holiness, or that he now fills a distinguished place in heaven. It may also happen among ourselves that some of the most eminent servants of Christ may not be the most extensively useful in the church. Acceptance with men, or success in our pious undertakings, should not be our main object. Let us approve ourselves to God, exert our talents vigorously, and leave the consequences to Him.

Are we desirous to follow Elijah to the bright regions above? We must “ not be conformed to this world,” nor any longer “ halt between two opinions.” We must resolutely devote ourselves to the Lord, seize and improve every opportunity of promoting his glory, and be constant unto death. Then, though our bodies

* A letter, containing a solemn reproof and prediction, is said to have been received by Jehoram, king of Judah, from the Prophet Elijah, some years after the date to which his translation is generally referred; 2 Chron. xxi. 12—15. There are those who suppose that letter to have been sent by Elisha, who was contemporary with the king; and it might possibly be prepared beforehand, in the spirit of prophecy, by Elijah, and directed to be sent after he had quitted the earth, that it might have the greater effect.

must awhile sleep in the dust, our spirits shall be conveyed, by the ministry of angels, into the mansions of the blessed.—It is your privilege, who serve the Lord Christ, to look forwards with triumphant joy to your approaching translation. After a few more years, “the Lord himself shall descend from heaven,” and shall “ransom you from the power of the grave.” Then, in a more honourable manner than Elijah, you “shall be caught up together in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall you ever be with the Lord.”*

Would to God this were the happy prospect of every reader! But may we not ask, “Do not you reject the counsel of God against yourselves?” He invites you to receive pardon, peace, and eternal life, in his Son Jesus Christ. But do you not despise the gracious invitations? He will revenge the insult, and you shall feel his anger. While “some shall awake to everlasting life,” you shall come forth “to shame and everlasting contempt.” Some, perhaps, who worship in the same church, or dwell in the same family, shall be conveyed “into Abraham’s bosom,” and you be conducted, by the executioners of divine vengeance, into a place of endless torment and despair. O, “flee from the wrath to come!”—We pray you, in Christ’s stead, “Be ye reconciled to God.”

* 1 Thess. iv. 16, 17.

E L I S H A.

CHAP. IX.—SECT. I.

Elisha, appointed to the prophetic office—attended Elijah, till his assumption into heaven—divided Jordan—healed the waters of Jericho—cursed the children of Beth-el—accompanied the confederate armies against the Moabites—multiplied the widow's oil—entertained by the pious Shunamite—raised her son to life.

MINISTERS and prophets may be removed from the church ; but the great Head continues to be present with it. “ They die, and return to their dust ;” but “ He has the residue of the Spirit,” and “ is alive for evermore.” This consideration should moderate our anxiety, and alleviate our grief ; though one and another, “ who seemed to be pillars,” may be taken away. They derived all their excellency, and all their usefulness, from Jesus, who is “ the same,” in power and every other perfection, “ yesterday, to-day, and for ever,” and who still exercises the same care over his people. May not He, therefore, raise up among ourselves as faithful servants, and as eminent instruments of his glory, as those were, whose departure may now be lamented ? Let us pray that He would pour out an abundant portion of that Spirit, by

which they were rendered a blessing to the world, upon those who are called to labour in the Gospel. "O God, we have heard with our ears, and our fathers have declared unto us, the noble works that thou didst in their days, and in the old time before them: O Lord, arise, help us, and deliver us for thine honour!"*

We were ready to grieve for Elijah's removal from the earth: but the Lord had provided a suitable successor; for "the spirit of Elijah rested on Elisha." There was a remarkable likeness between the two Prophets. Elisha bore a striking resemblance to his master, in his manner of life, his disposition, the faithful execution of his office, and the miraculous powers which he possessed.

Years before Christ, 906. He had an appointment to the charge some years before he fully entered upon it. † As he was following the plough, he received a divine intimation of his being chosen out of all Israel to that high and spiritual employment. Elijah's mantle, suddenly cast upon him, was understood as the call of God, which was accompanied with such an energy as inclined him to accept it. Immediately, therefore, he left all his former connexions and engagements, and became the constant attendant of Elijah, that he might profit by the example of that holy man, and thereby be gradually fitted for his work.

Do we ask the reason of this appointment? "The Lord seeth not as man seeth:" He pays no respect to outward grandeur, or eminence of rank; neither does He choose any because of their education or their

* Litany, from Psalm xliv. 1, 26. † Kings xix. 19—21.

natural abilities. But he gives his servants the proper qualifications and dispositions for the place in which He designs to fix them. We cannot but adore his secret and invincible influence upon the soul. When the Saviour said to one and another, "Follow me," the dearest friends and most lucrative occupations were cheerfully renounced, and the most arduous duties performed, from love to his name. May we feel the energy of his grace, "working in us mightily," and by an immediate and unreserved submission, may we "make our calling and election sure!"

Years before Christ, 896. Long did he enjoy the instructive converse of Elijah; and at that distressing season, when his guide was about to be taken from him, he discovered the strength of his attachment to him.* Determined to accompany him to the end, though entreated to desist from his attendance, he solemnly declared, again and again, "I will not leave thee."—With the same fervour and steadiness of affection, may We cleave to and follow our exalted Leader! Are we devoted to his service? Then let us resolve, by his assistance, that nothing shall separate us from Him.

We observe the disinterestedness and piety of Elisha, when, at his master's desire, he made his last request, and asked, not for worldly blessings, but for an abundant measure of divine grace. He said, "Let a double portion of the spirit be upon me." From a sense of his own inability to stand in that most arduous situation, for which all the firmness of Elijah had scarcely been sufficient, he prayed that he might be supported

* 2 Kings ii. 1, &c.

from above, as that holy man had been, and be endued with the same prudence, zeal, and fidelity. He petitioned for "a double portion:" by which he might mean only a very large supply, or, probably, double of what the prophets usually had. It is possible, indeed, while he felt his own unfitness for his work, he might conclude that nothing short of twice that aid, which was communicated to Elijah, would enable him to maintain his ground; and therefore, in the fervour of his desires towards God, he might properly ask it.

Do not we also fill an important station? and are we not placed in perilous circumstances? What then shall we wish for so much as that wisdom, strength, and courage, which will be necessary for an honourable discharge of our trust? We thank God that the liberty of requesting what we would have done for us is likewise granted to us by One greater than Elijah; by One who has in Himself all blessings to bestow. We are not straitened in him: let us not be straitened in ourselves. Let us come with large petitions, and "covet earnestly the best gifts." If, indeed, we are sensible of our own inability, we shall pray most importunately for spiritual gifts: nor shall we pray in vain; our very desires to obtain grace are a certain token that we shall not be disappointed.

Elisha obtained the suit. Of this he had been assured, while he was witness of his master's glorious assumption into heaven. Yet, lamenting his own and the public loss, he rent his clothes, and cried out, "My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof:" as if he had said, "Alas! what

shall Israel do, when its defence is taken away?"— It is an awful providence, which removes the faithful ministers of God. They are the bulwark of the land, for, by their example, intercessions, and admonitions, they contribute as much to its protection as the chariots of war, and the horsemen thereof. Then let us "lift up our prayer for the remnant that is left," that God may strengthen them for their work, and render them an extensive blessing in their generation. "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?" Is his hand shortened? or are his mercies restrained?

Elisha soon experienced the assistance of that Spirit which he had desired. He assumed the mantle, which his master had dropped; and, in order to prove his commission, with this very mantle he smote the streams of Jordan upon his return, and opened a miraculous passage through the river. The sons of the prophets observed the transaction, and immediately, with much reverence, confessed the honour put upon him. Further evidence of his divine legation appeared in the works, both of mercy and of judgment, which God wrought by him. A surprising train of miracles followed, which will furnish us with many important instructions.

At his word the waters of Jericho were healed, by no other operation than that of casting salt into the spring. The method of cure was simple, and could not have succeeded except it had been made effectual by the power of God. But the event showed that he spake and acted in faith, as the messenger of Heaven. Nor ought we to doubt of obtaining a happy issue in

any instance, where we have the direction and promise of the Lord. Then we may expect great things from the feeblest means.

In the neighbourhood of Beth-el, the little children of the city came forth to mock him, insulted him for his age and infirmity, and bad him "Go up," with a reference, probably, to the late assumption of Elijah. Immediately, as if the wild beasts of the forest had been subject to his control, when he pronounced the curse, two bears rushed upon them, and destroyed forty-two of the company.—The mournful history may excite our wonder: but let God, and his Prophet also, be justified. Surely this solemn judgment will teach us to "stand in awe, and sin not." It is evident that Elisha acted agreeably to a divine impulse upon his mind, or else the event would not have confirmed his imprecation; and accordingly he is said to have done it "in the name of the Lord." The behaviour of these young persons was extremely profane; and therefore God determined to make them an example of his vengeance. He cannot bear that his people, and especially his ministers, should be despised and scoffed at; for He considers the contempt as put upon himself. Even little children should learn, from this instance, that the God of heaven pays a regard to their words, and is provoked by the speeches which they utter in derision of holy things or holy men: nor will their tender age, or the neglect of their education, secure them from his displeasure.

The parents, probably, were in this case more guilty than their offspring, as having taught them to

treat religion and religious characters with scorn. For THEIR correction, therefore, the visitation might be intended. They were punished for their impiety, by the hand of God himself, in the desolation of their families. This very circumstance also, as being of public notoriety, was calculated to check the profligacy of the place and neighbourhood. It was one of the crying sins of Israel, that "they mocked the messengers of God."* In this awful manner, then, He vindicated the authority of his Prophet, and chastised their insolent and persecuting spirit.

What shall be said to those persons among ourselves, who train up their children in ignorance and contempt of God and his truth? We would bespeak their attention. O, consider what complicated guilt you incur, and what various distresses you are likely to bring both upon yourselves and them! For what can you expect to be the issue of such a course? Will not God interpose, and make himself known by the judgments which he executeth? Or will it be at all strange if you should be witnesses to the untimely end of those whom you love? They may perish justly in their iniquity; but will there not be an insupportable burden upon your consciences, if they have learned from you to neglect and despise the service of their Creator? O, be concerned for their eternal welfare, before it be too late!

From Beth-el the Prophet retired to Carmel, where, probably, he might enjoy more opportunities of private

* 2 Chron. xxxvi. 16.

devotion. But he was soon called forth to public notice. He attended the united armies of Israel, Edom, and Judah, perhaps by the divine direction, in an expedition against the Moabites, which gave occasion for a singular display of the glory of God.* These numerous hosts were reduced to a very great strait from the want of water; and in their perplexity the three associated kings applied for help to Elisha. The man of God, however, "knew not to give flattering titles," but with authority, and with much seeming severity, he reprov'd Jehoram, the wicked king of Israel, for his detestable hypocrisy, and for his attachment to the idolatries of his father's house. The language, indeed, may appear inconsistent with the obedience and respect which he owed as a subject. But he acted by a singular commission, and probably according to express instructions. His conduct, therefore, under such circumstances, can be no precedent for us. We are not to court the favour of the great any more than Elisha, or to "have men's persons in admiration because of advantage." But, while we abhor their sins, and with all prudence as well as fidelity bear our testimony against them, if our place require it, still it should be our invariable rule, to "render honour to whom honour is due."

To the pious prince Jehoshaphat Elisha paid regard, and for his sake inquired of the Lord. When his spirit was composed by means of sacred music, he received the gracious communications of Heaven, and

* 2 Kings iii. 6, &c.

under the divine inspiration foretold a miraculous deliverance from the drought, and a decisive victory over the Moabites. But these were obtained in answer to his prayer, and must have been considered, not only as an honour to Him, but, in an especial manner, as an encouragement to trust the Lord, and a public attestation of the true religion.—It is a peculiar blessing to be favoured with the society of those who have power with God, and can prevail by their charitable intercessions. Probably the world of ungodly sinners may enjoy many advantages, for the sake of the few excellent persons, whose characters may not be much known or valued, amongst them. Our own kingdom may be upheld and may prosper, in consequence of the fervent supplications of those who are dear to God. May we learn to place our highest regard upon such as are most precious in his account!

Elisha seems not to have been brought into notice and esteem at court, as we might have supposed from the late miraculous deliverance obtained by his interposition. But, though he continued a poor man, generally neglected, he dispensed blessings from Heaven wherever he went. He felt compassion for the distressed, and, like our Lord, wrought many wonderful works, not to advance his own reputation, but to show forth the glory of the Lord God of Israel, and to confer happiness on others.

Upon the application of a sorrowful widow, he multiplied her oil in so large a measure, that by the profits of it her debts were honourably discharged, her sons

rescued from bondage, and the whole family supported.* We possess not the supernatural powers of Elisha; but we owe the same attention to the afflicted, and by our well-directed liberality we also may “cause the widow’s heart to sing for joy.”†

In one of his circuits through the land, he met with a very hospitable reception from a pious woman of considerable rank at Shunem, who accommodated him with a retired room for his own peculiar use. The Prophet, from a sense of gratitude, desirous to requite her kindness, offered to exert his influence for her in any way she wished. But her modesty and contentment would not permit her to make any request: she was satisfied with her station. However, at the prayer of Elisha, a child was granted her, and thereby, as it should seem, her only grievance was removed. God is often pleased to give a present recompense to those who favour and assist his servants for His sake. For thus He has assured us, “He that receiveth a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man’s reward.”‡

But even our blessings expose us to many trials. At the very time when the mother, probably, flattered herself with the expectation of much comfort from her son, he died. Yet the event was so ordered as to afford a stronger testimony of Elisha’s commission, and of her unfeigned reliance upon God. With anguish of spirit, but with a surprising confidence of obtaining deliverance, she instantly applied to Elisha, and thus

* 2 Kings iv. 1, &c. † Job xxix. 13. ‡ Matt. x. 41.

proved herself in the number of those women, who by faith "received their dead raised to life again."* In the midst of her distress she possessed an uncommon firmness and composure of mind ; and therefore to the Prophet's inquiry, respecting the state of her family, she could reply, "It is well." How eminent a pattern of trust in God, and resignation to His will ! How few are willing to allow that "It is well," when He blasts their schemes of happiness, and "takes away from them the desire of their eyes with a stroke !"

Elisha first dispatched his servant in great haste, for the recovery of the child. But that expedient failed, perhaps for their further trial. At length, however, he himself arrived ; yet even then he felt his own inability to effect the change he wished. But he cried unto God in faith ; and, through his repeated and very ardent supplications, the beloved son was restored alive to his mother. In our deepest afflictions, the Lord will be to us a "God of hope." Though we look not for the present resurrection of the dear friends who are removed, there are still many other ways, in which He can wipe the tears from our eyes, and "turn for us our mourning into dancing. Elisha's example teaches us to "weep with them that weep," and to bear upon our hearts before God the different cases of them that mourn. The ministers of Christ, in an especial manner, should learn from him to pay the tenderest regard to such as are oppressed with sorrow or temptation, to listen to all their complaints and lamentations, and to make earnest intercession for

* Heb. xi. 35.

them to "the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort." O that this meek, disinterested, and benevolent disposition, were more clearly evidenced by all the disciples of our compassionate Redeemer! Like Him, we should sympathize with the distressed, and rejoice to extend relief and consolation to them, though with much expense and difficulty to ourselves. Jesus hath "left us the example, that we should follow his steps."

E L I S H A.

SECT. II.

Elisha visited and relieved the sons of the prophets—his conduct to Naaman—and to Gehazi—caused iron to swim—disclosed the king of Syria's counsels—his behaviour toward the Syrian army—foretold a speedy deliverance from famine—recompensed the Shunamite—went to Damascus, and was there consulted by the king—warned Hazael—sent to anoint Jehu—attended on his dying bed by king Joash—a dead body revived by his bones.

THE man of God, whose character we are contemplating, has already appeared in an amiable light, and exhibited a pattern of ministerial fidelity, meekness, and love. Concerned for the honour of his God, he laboured to promote a revival of true religion, and sought not his own advancement in the world. The hand of the Lord was with him, even so as to overrule, in various instances, the ordinary course of nature : and yet it should seem that “ a disobedient and gainsaying people ” despised his instructions. This would astonish us the more, if we did not recollect a stronger proof of the obduracy of the human heart : the Son of God himself, who wrought so many wonderful works of mercy, met with almost universal con-

tempt and infamy. Let not the servant complain that he receives no better treatment than his Master, but patiently persevere in well-doing to the end.

Elisha discovered a peculiar condescension and benevolence in his attention to cases of private distress. While he visited the schools of the prophets, doubtless with a view to the spiritual improvement of the pious youths, he was not regardless of their temporal necessities.* He saw them oppressed with famine, but instantly relieved them by his fatherly care. His miraculous powers were exerted at one time to prevent their being poisoned by noxious herbs, at another to feed a hundred of them by multiplying the very food which had been provided for himself, and which he generously gave up for their sustenance. WE likewise are required "to be ready to every good work," and to "look, not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others."†

Years before The fame of Elisha reached to some Christ, 894. neighbouring countries, and by his means the perfections of the true God were manifested to Heathens. Naaman, a celebrated general among the Syrians, being afflicted with a grievous leprosy, was induced by the representation of a little captive maid to solicit the assistance of Elisha for the removal of his disease.‡ The application was first made to the king of Israel, as if He must have been best acquainted with the Prophet, or could have commanded his services. But he seemed not to have known, or to have

* 2 Kings iv. 38, &c.

† Tit. iii. 1. Phil. ii. 4.

‡ 2 Kings v. 1, &c.

forgotten, that he had so eminent a person in his dominions. Elisha, however, interposed for the honour of the God of Israel, and desired the attendance of this Syrian captain.

Naaman, therefore, with much pomp and a large retinue, waited at the Prophet's door, and there received a message, that upon washing seven times in Jordan he should be perfectly whole. But he went away in a rage; for he thought himself treated unsuitably to his high dignity; and despised the means prescribed, as utterly inadequate to the end proposed. And how shall we justify the behaviour of Elisha, which has, we allow, the appearance of rudeness and arrogance? The circumstances of the case should be considered; and then we shall see a propriety in that which otherwise we might condemn. The Syrian, evidently full of his own importance, had probably conceived an idea that the man of God would be honoured by such a visitant, and would pay court to him for his rank and magnificence. It was therefore designed to humble his pride, and to impress his mind with a reverence for the God of Israel, by showing him that the Prophet of Heaven regarded not these outward distinctions, and sought no favour from him. Doubtless it becomes the ministers of Christ to be meek, and gentle, and easy of access to all: but there are occasions when it is necessary for them also to "magnify their office." They disgrace their sacred character when they fawn upon the great, and, by their flattering attentions to them, cherish that haughtiness of temper, which they should aim to subdue,

The very simple method appointed for the cure was likewise intended as a trial to Naaman. It accorded not with the conclusions of human wisdom ; but, in the view of reason, it might be deemed foolish and contemptible. On that very account, probably, it was fixed upon, to display the sovereign power of Jehovah. This is his most usual way of procedure. "The weakness of God is stronger than men." In the dispensation of the Gospel it is His plan, throughout, to confer all spiritual blessings by those means which are mortifying to our pride, as requiring a submission both of the understanding and of the will to God, that he alone may be glorified. Hence it is that many quarrel with them, and will not prove their efficacy ; for the remedy which the Gospel prescribes to sinners for their loathsome malady is exactly similar to this which the Syrian disdained—"Wash and be clean."

At length, however, the haughty soldier, when his attendants had remonstrated with him, complied with the direction, and instantly experienced in himself the promised cure. The Lord will have us to come down to His terms ; nor will he bestow his salvation upon us till we unfeignedly submit to his appointment.

Naaman returned full of gratitude ; and, after making a noble confession of his faith in the God of Israel, as the only true God, he earnestly entreated Elisha to accept a present. But here again we admire the disinterested conduct of the man of God, and his generous concern for the honour of religion. Far from being in affluent circumstances, on some occasions he

very readily received, and subsisted on, the bounty of others. But apprehending, probably, that the hopeful convictions which Naaman discovered might be checked by any appearance of selfishness in him, he peremptorily rejected the offer, and must thereby have impressed the Syrian's mind more strongly with a persuasion of the reality and excellence of his piety.—It is not wrong “that those who preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel;”^{*} but it is of great importance for them to prove that they can despise their own advantages, in order to glorify God, and promote the grand object of their ministry. In some cases, it would be a mark of pride in them to refuse a gift; but they will labour to poor purpose, and both their principles and their profession will be held in utter contempt, if their aim be to enrich themselves, or even if they be suspected of making a gain of godliness. “They that will be rich fall into temptation, and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition.”[†]

This awful declaration was verified in Gehazi, the servant of Elisha. He coveted the treasures which his master had declined; and, following Naaman with a falsehood in his mouth, he contrived to obtain a large sum for himself. The fraud was not long concealed. Elisha detected it, and expressed his abhorrence of it, while in God's name he pronounced the sentence, that both he and his posterity should inherit the leprosy of Naaman. The sin was indeed of a most malignant

* 1 Cor. ix. 14.

† 1 Tim. vi. 9.

nature, as it tended to disgrace the Prophet, and bring religion into reproach ; and therefore the punishment was appointed to be a standing memorial of the baseness of his offence. O, let us fear the love of money, which is “ the root of all evil !” Are we surprised to find such complicated villany even in Elisha’s family? Alas ! no place, no society, no instructions, or example, how excellent soever, will be an infallible security to us. Our Lord himself had a Judas in the small company of his Apostles.

Is it inquired, “ Why was the cure vouchsafed to Naaman ?” Let our Saviour answer : He has observed, on this very case, that God dispenses his favours in a sovereign manner, as he pleases ; for there were many lepers in Israel at that very time, who were all passed by, while an idolatrous Syrian was healed.*

Elisha continued to be a blessing to his country, both in public and private. Whilst the sons of the prophets were enlarging the place of their residence, he attended for their encouragement and assistance, and wrought a miracle to relieve one of them from distress, by causing iron to swim on the surface of the water.† In vain the king of Syria prepared his ambuscades against the Israelites, whilst Elisha disclosed his counsels, which were evidently communicated to him for the very purpose by divine revelation. This, indeed, exposed his life to the most imminent danger ; for an armed host of the Syrians came to apprehend him. But even then, though he had no visible defence, he possessed an astonishing confidence and composure.

* Luke iv. 27.

† 2 Kings vi. 1.

His servant, terrified by the multitudes of surrounding enemies, cried out, "Alas! my master, how shall we do?" The Prophet, looking up to God in faith, replied, "Fear not; for they that be with us are more than they that be with them:" and, upon his prayer, the young man's eyes were opened to behold an immense company of angels, like "horses and chariots of fire, round about Elisha." They enjoy an invincible protection, who are taken under the care and keeping of an almighty God; and therefore they may adopt that triumphant song, "I will not be afraid of ten thousands of people, that have set themselves against me round about."* Like Elisha's trembling attendant, we are often dismayed at the first appearance of danger, forgetting that "The Lord is our defence." But, as far as we lean upon the arm of the mighty God of Jacob, we may apply to ourselves the declaration of Elisha, and disperse our fears under this assurance, "They that be with us are more than they that be with them."

Little do the enemies of God consider what folly as well as wickedness they are guilty of in opposing His work and His people. Their counsels are vain, and must turn to their own confusion. At the Prophet's word, the Syrian host was smitten with blindness, till he himself, like a conqueror, had led them into the midst of Samaria, and delivered them up to the king of Israel. Then the very men, who had come to take his life, trembled for their own. Jehoram immediately proposed to put them to death, as his lawful prey; and

* Psalm. iii. 6.

they were spared only by the intercession of Elisha, whom they themselves had intended to destroy. By his desire they were supplied with provisions, and then dismissed in peace. What an example of forbearance and kindness towards injurious persecutors is here set before us! Let us not suppose that ancient saints alone were required to exercise this disposition, or that we are at liberty, in any case, to gratify our resentment. To us also the precept is given, "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves :—but, if thine enemy hunger, feed him,"* How opposite is this to the dictates of a depraved nature, which can never relish the idea of returning good for evil! O let us watch and pray against the pride and bitterness of our hearts! For into what enormities would they not lead us!

Another danger threatened the life of Elisha. The inhabitants of Samaria, while closely besieged by the Syrians, were perishing by famine. The king himself felt the weight of the calamity; but, instead of being humbled before God, and renouncing his iniquities, he was filled with rage against Elisha, who, probably, had foretold and denounced this judgment as a punishment for his wickedness. He determined, therefore, to rid himself of this troublesome man, and sent an executioner to destroy him. What folly, what madness, was this! For what had Elisha done? Alas! sinners, even under affliction, are more ready to quarrel with every thing around them, than with their own evil practices, which have brought their sufferings upon them. But, while Jehoram, with his vile tempers,

* Rom. xii. 19, 20,

resembled “the troubled sea, which cannot rest,” Elisha; though aware of his danger, and in expectation of the murderer, sat still in his house, and with a sweet serenity of mind counselled the elders of the city.—Faith in God will inspire the strongest confidence, and enable us to maintain an undisturbed tranquillity, in the face of an enraged enemy. “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee; because he trusteth in thee.”*

The king was fired with indignation both against God and the Prophet; but Elisha pacified his resentment by declaring, in the name of the Lord, that the very next day would terminate the calamity, and produce an astonishing plenty.† One of the attendant courtiers, indeed, turned the assertion into ridicule; but he received an awful punishment for his incredulity and contempt of the man of God. According to Elisha’s word, he saw the promised plenty, and yet perished in the midst of it. How provoking to God is our unbelief! He will surely perform what He has said: and therefore He considers himself as insulted by us when we limit his power or his grace, and ask, “Can He bestow such a favour? Can He work so great a deliverance?”

The kindness of the pious Shunamite to Elisha met with a fresh recompense. By his counsel she escaped the distresses of the national famine; and for his sake she recovered her former possessions, of which she had been unjustly deprived.‡ Those good offices, which are undertaken for God or His people, will not be lost;

* Isa. xxvi. 3. † 2 Kings vii. 1, &c. ‡ viii. 1, &c.

for "a book of remembrance is written before the Lord," in which a cup of cold water, given to a disciple, will not be unnoticed.

Years before Christ, 835. The labours of Elisha were not entirely confined to the land of Israel; at least for some special purpose he travelled to Damascus. But how dared he to venture himself among the Syrians, who had sought his life? He went, doubtless, by the divine direction, and therefore had nothing to fear. The Lord can at all times protect his servants, and "make even their enemies to be at peace with them." The king himself, who had before sent an army to apprehend him, treated him with peculiar respect, and requested him to inquire of the Lord concerning the event of that disease which then oppressed him. How great an honour was this to the man of God! It had been well for Ben-hadad had he consulted him in his health, or even in his sickness, with real contrition. But many obstinate offenders, when the terrors of death are upon them, will seek to the people and the ministers of God, whom they had once despised. It is pleasing to observe this at any time; for it is such a confession as greatly redounds to the credit of religion.

We cannot but remark Elisha's very singular behaviour to Hazael, the king's officer. He told him that his master might recover, as his disorder was not fatal; but that he would surely be taken off by some other means. He then burst into tears at the prospect of those miseries which the very man before him was about to bring upon Israel, and warned him of the wanton cruelty which he was about to exercise. Hazael

expressed a perfect astonishment, believing himself incapable of so vile a conduct, and exclaimed, "But what? Is thy servant a dog, that he should do this great thing?" Yet, immediately upon his departure, he began to fulfil the prediction. What an instance is this of the deceitfulness of the human heart! Sinners, in general, would be overwhelmed with horror, if all the crimes which they will certainly commit were previously represented to them. Let us suspect ourselves, and implore the divine assistance. "He that trusteth in his own heart is a fool."*

God had determined to remove Jehoram from the throne of Israel, and to transfer the power to Jehu. This intention was revealed to Elisha, and by him, through another person, who could do it with less danger, to Jehu himself.† For a considerable period after that event, the sacred history makes no mention of our Prophet. Perhaps he was utterly disregarded by Jehu, Jehoahaz, and Joash, who reigned in succession: but we conceive that he was usefully employed, and much honoured of God, though in a state of obscurity. The faithful minister of religion will not court the favour of the great, or mourn its loss on his own account; but, wherever he is, he will be improving his talents for the good of the church, which cannot fail to reap very extensive advantages from his labours.

Years before Christ, about 839. At length the closing scene arrived.-- Above sixty years from the time of his appointment, he had continued to discharge his office with zeal and fidelity. Nor was his dying bed in-

* Prov. xxviii. 26.

† 2 Kings ix. 1, &c.

glorious; though he did not quit the world in the same triumphant manner as Elijah.* Joash the king of Israel, stood among his weeping attendants. Probably ashamed of his former neglect of him, he then with tears acknowledged the value of this eminent preacher of righteousness, as the best protection of the state.— This is not an uncommon case. Many very profligate persons will pay a peculiar respect to the faithful servants of God, who are about to be taken away, and bear witness to their worth and excellence, though they had ever before treated them with contempt.

Joash received a recompense for the regard he showed to the good man in his last moments; for Elisha, on whom the spirit of prophecy still rested, assured him, by some significant actions, that he should be the instrument of delivering Israel from the oppression of the Syrians. It cannot but be profitable to visit the beds of departing saints. We have great cause to lament their removal; but, while we express our affection for them, we may carry away a blessing for ourselves.

A singular honour was conferred upon Elisha, even after his dissolution: a dead body cast into his sepulchre, upon touching his bones, in a miraculous manner revived. This might be designed to recall the attention of the people to the character and instructions of the deceased Prophet.—But we look to One, infinitely superior to Elisha, “who was dead and is alive,” and who “through death has destroyed him that had the power of death,” and given us the hopes of a glorious resurrection to life eternal.

* 2 Kings xiii. 14, &c.

The piety and zeal of Elisha are perhaps generally applauded among ourselves ; and applauded, too, by those very persons who dislike and reproach every thing that bears the least resemblance to his example. We can assign the reason : you are not disturbed by the holiness and the labours of those saints who are now removed from the earth. But the presence, the conduct, and admonitions, of such as in any measure tread in their steps, are a constant reproof to you, and therefore they excite your enmity and opposition. In your own justification, you cry out against their fervour in religion as extravagance and enthusiasm. How then, would you have endured the far greater sanctity which appeared in some of these very eminent instances before us ? Or, how can you expect to join their society in the world above ? We are hastening to the end of all things. Leaving others, therefore, let us ask, What is our own character ? Among whom shall we be numbered ? A separation must shortly take place : will it be for our honour, or our comfort ? Surely we should be serious in this inquiry, and give diligence, that we may be accepted of the Lord, and, together with all his ransomed people, be admitted into the kingdom of his glory.

J O N A H.

CHAP. X.

Jonah, author of his own history—a Prophet in Israel—sent to Nineveh—refused to go, and sailed for Tarshish—overtaken by a storm—cast into the sea—swallowed by a fish—cried to God—delivered—went and preached to the Ninevites—repined at the divine mercy to them—grieved immoderately for his gourd—reproved by God.

IT has often been urged as a strong proof of the integrity of the sacred writers, and consequently of the truth of their narrations, that they took no pains to conceal or palliate their own failings, but openly declared them, with all the circumstances of aggravation attending them. They were solicitous, not to set off themselves as the objects of admiration, but to justify God in his proceedings, whatever might be thought of their characters. This remark must occur to us in the present history.

Jonah, probably, was the author of that little book which bears his name, and which relates some surprising incidents in his life. From this account he appears in a very unfavourable light; and, though it is generally allowed that he was an upright man, he exhibits a striking instance of human depravity, of the defects and perverseness which may remain even in the regenerate. But, instead of sitting in judgment upon

him, let us examine whether we are not in danger of dishonouring and provoking God, as he did. We must censure what was clearly criminal in him : yet may we not see greater reason to condemn ourselves ? May we be convicted and humbled for our own guilt, and enabled to walk more suitably to our holy profession, in the Gospel of Jesus Christ !

Years before Christ, about 802. Jonah lived and prophesied in the kingdom of Israel, during the reign of Jeroboam the second, not long after Elisha.* Probably he delivered many predictions to his own countrymen, with which we are not acquainted. The circumstances recorded concerning him relate to a particular commission which was given him, to preach at a distance from Judea. The Lord sent him to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire, a very large and abandoned city, to denounce the divine wrath against the inhabitants for their iniquities.† The call was clear and express, so as to preclude all doubt about his duty. Yet he refused to comply with it ; and, that he might hear no more of such troublesome revelations, he left his former abode, and “ fled from the presence of the Lord.”

What ! Could he be ignorant that God “ filleth heaven and earth,” and that no place can hide us from Him ? He might, indeed, suppose that the spirit of prophecy was conveyed to Judea, and that in a remote country he should have no visions of the sort. But, whatever might be his sentiment, his conduct was ab-

* 2 Kings xiv. 25.

† Jon. i. 1, &c.

surd and wicked. It is an awful sign when "the presence of God" becomes irksome to us, and we wish to avoid all intercourse with Him. This was the case with Adam immediately after the fall: nor is it different with ourselves, whenever we desire to act contrary to the command of God; for then we no longer love to be where we have been accustomed to meet him. His house and ordinances, the word and the throne of grace, are painful to us, and cover us with confusion. Is not this an evident proof of a sad declension?

Jonah was unwilling to execute his commission, not through such an humble sense of unworthiness and inability as Moses and Jeremiah felt; but, we apprehend, through a distrust of God, and a dread of the consequences. For what could he look for at Nineveh but cruel mockings, imprisonment, or death itself?—Thus many are unfaithful to their convictions, and disobedient to the heavenly call, "lest they should suffer persecution." Ah! how light do you set by the authority of God, if you refuse to fulfil your bounden duty, because it may subject you to inconvenience and dangers!

Jonah concluded, from the divine forbearance, that the threatened ruin of the city would be averted or delayed, and therefore that he himself should be accounted a false Prophet.* It was no wonder, then, that he deserted his post, while he regarded his own credit and safety more than the honour of God, or the deliverance of the people. How different was the spirit of the Apostles, who, at the hazard and expense of every

* Jon. iv. 2.

thing dear to them in this world, went forth to preach a despised Gospel, and “ rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for the name of Jesus !” * How opposite was the conduct of St. Paul, who could say, in the prospect of the severest afflictions, “ None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the Gospel of the grace of God !” † Let the “ stewards of the mysteries of God” remember what simplicity, courage, disinterestedness, and fidelity, become their character ; and let them not “ seek their own, but the things which are Jesus Christ’s.”

The Lord perceives many perverse tempers in his children, and, like a wise as well as tender Father, will not indulge them, but adopts the most suitable means for their correction and amendment. He contrived, therefore, by a tremendous judgment, to awaken the senseless Prophet, and recover him to his duty. Whilst Jonah was sailing from Tarshish, amidst a company of idolatrous seamen, the Lord stirred up a violent tempest, so that they were all filled with consternation, in the expectation of immediate destruction. All but Jonah : he had fallen into a profound sleep (strange as it may seem, that his conscience would suffer him to rest) ; but at length the ship-master, who was probably a stranger to the true God, roused him to prayer. What an alarm and a reproof must he have felt from

* Acts v. 41.

† xx. 24.

those very striking words, "What meanest thou, O sleeper? Arise, call upon thy God, if so be that God will think upon us, that we perish not." May the backslider, who is sunk into a state of spiritual stupor, attend to this address, and shake off "the spirit of slumber." For, "What meanest thou, O sleeper?" How canst thou remain insensible to thy danger? "Arise, and call upon thy God."

The sailors concluded, from this uncommon storm, that the divine vengeance pursued some one among them for atrocious wickedness, and they expected to discover the guilty person by casting lots. Though they might act superstitiously, the providence of God overruled the whole transaction; and the lot fell upon Jonah. The offender was immediately detected, and obliged to confess his iniquity, which he thought to have concealed. What anguish must have oppressed his mind, when he found himself overtaken by the wrath of Heaven! Constrained, probably, by a supernatural impulse, he pronounced his own doom, and directed the mariners to throw him overboard, to appease the raging of the sea. They were unwilling to execute the sentence: but, till this was done, in vain they tried to gain the land. The Lord demanded the criminal: and only upon his being given up to the waves did the tempest subside. The Prophet, then, went down into the deep; yet he perished not; for God had prepared a large fish to swallow him up alive, which secured him in its belly for three days and nights.

This doubtless, in a wonderful manner, displays the power and uncontrollable sovereignty of God over all creatures. We attempt not to account for the strange event, which was confessedly out of the common order of things; nor do we attend to any curious inquiries about it: but we acknowledge and adore the hand of God in it, for the correction and recovery of his disobedient servant. Very mysterious are the ways which He frequently uses for the restoring of his backsliding children; yet in general, we observe, they are reduced by some painful dispensations. Perhaps nothing less would subdue their rebellious spirit. He follows them in mercy, as He did Jonah, and confounds their perverse purposes, that at length they may be willing to submit. O, listen to his voice in the visitation of his providence: for He says, "Return unto me, and I will return unto you!"*

We should not have expected to hear any more of Jonah: but, though "cast down, he was not destroyed." Out of the belly of the fish he cried to the God of all grace, with deep humiliation for his sin, and with a believing hope of deliverance.† The prayer of faith prevailed, and, at the Lord's command, he came forth from his prison.—Never was the suit of a returning sinner rejected. O, be encouraged to lift up your supplication, low as you may have fallen, and complicated as your miseries may be! "Only acknowledge thine iniquity, that thou hast transgressed against the Lord thy God."‡ He, who heard and par-

* Mal. iii. 7.

† Jon. ii. 1, &c.

‡ Jer. iii. 13.

doned Jonah, will not cast out your prayer: He who, raised him from the bottom of the sea, will not turn his mercy from you.

After this severe affliction, the Prophet was again put upon his trial, by a renewal of the divine commission, that he should go and preach at Nineveh; and, having "learned obedience by the things which he suffered," he did not then decline the task.* He went agreeably to his injunctions, and declared the impending desolation of that immense city.—It is well if by any means our aversion to duty be overcome. Have our disappointments and crosses produced this salutary effect? Can we say, "Before I was afflicted, I went astray; but now have I kept thy word?† We hear no more of Jonah's reluctance; but are we willing to do the things commanded us, whatever they may cost us?"

And what reception did the awful message meet with at Nineveh? A general alarm took place among the inhabitants, from the greatest to the least. They believed the report; they fasted, repented, and obtained mercy. They exhibit, therefore, both a pattern and an encouragement to those against whom the terrors of the Lord are denounced. Will you credit the divine threatenings, and cry earnestly, with a contrite heart, that your sentence may be reversed? Your application shall be regarded; for "the Lord waits to be gracious." But beware, lest the example before you should be a witness against you. It is a painful

* Jon. iii. 1, &c,

† Psal. cxix. 67,

reflection, that the ministers of Christ are not attended to as Jonah was. "The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it; because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here."* The Ninevites, probably, listened to the Prophet the more readily, on account of his very singular case; for he was "a sign" unto them. But the case of that exalted Prophet, "who is risen up among us," is still more astonishing. The death and resurrection of "the Son of Man" are shadowed forth in the history of Jonah, and are a more convincing sign to us. He, who "descended into the lower parts of the earth," and "rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures," calls us to turn from our evil ways. If we refuse to hear his voice, we shall be left without excuse.

Who, then, hath believed the report of the Gospel? Who hath been humbled under the mighty hand of God? Are not those, who were filthy, filthy still? Do not many harden themselves in their iniquities, and presume that no punishment shall follow? Ah! Sirs, this impenitence and obduracy mark you out for destruction. Did you, indeed, bow before God with sincere contrition, you also might escape the threatened vengeance, as the Ninevites did. But, if you despise the warning, you shall "have judgment without mercy." Though you are not favoured with the personal ministry of Christ or his Apostles, the same truths which they inculcated are declared unto you; and if you

* Matt. xii. 41.

reject his gracious offers, tendered to you even by the meanest of his servants, you will be as inexcusable as if you had lived in the days of our Lord himself. O that you were wise, and knew the time of your visitation !

The perverseness of Jonah was not yet totally overcome. We might have expected that he would have rejoiced in the penitence and deliverance of the Ninevites. But "it displeased him exceedingly, and he was very angry."* He complained that the divine forbearance had falsified his predictions, and made him appear in the light of an imposter ; and therefore he wished to be removed from the earth. This betrayed a strange peevishness of spirit, and a very improper regard to himself, as if his own credit were of more consequence than the salvation of all the Ninevites. His former chastisement seemed to be forgotten, since he recurred to the very same temper which he had before discovered.

It is easy to censure Jonah ; but is not his case our own ? The application to ourselves may be unpleasant and offensive ; but it is highly necessary. Alas ! how ineffectual are all outward means to eradicate the depravity of our nature ! Though subdued for a season, it will break forth again and again. In some favoured hours we may rashly conclude that our inward foes are destroyed, and that we shall no more be in danger from the same quarter. But our triumph may be short. Fresh temptations may draw forth our old corruptions perhaps with greater vigour, especially if we are care-

* Jon. iv. 1, &c.

less and confident. O, what continual need we have to "walk humbly with God," to suspect and fear ourselves, and to rely upon the grace of Jesus for the complete and final victory!

The petulance of Jonah was highly sinful; and the Lord manifested his displeasure against him, yet with such tenderness and condescension as may justly surprise us. He called him to account, and vouchsafed to argue with him, "Dost thou well to be angry?"—The Prophet had retired from the city, and waited at some little distance, as if with an eager desire to see it consumed. In that unpleasant situation, it afforded him some comfort that he was sheltered from the heat by a gourd, which the Lord had suddenly prepared for him. But, while he rejoiced in his gourd, it was as suddenly removed, and he was left to faint under the scorching beams of the sun. The peevish man grieved immoderately for his loss, and in a fretful spirit, as before, wished that he might die. It appears wonderful that God still bore with his folly and perverseness, and did not cut him off in righteous indignation. Upon the question being repeated, "Dost thou well to be angry?" Jonah persisted in his impatience, "I do well to be angry even unto death." It was a presumptuous expression; yet the Lord continued to deal tenderly with him, aiming only to correct his evil tempers. He reproved him for discovering such a fond attachment to the poor, senseless, perishable plant; and for complaining of the divine conduct in sparing the Ninevites, since they were extremely numerous, and their lives of immense importance.

We mourn for the very dishonourable behaviour of this man of God ; but are we instructed for ourselves ? Is there no resentment cherished in our hearts, for which we might be severely rebuked ? Let us inquire, “ Doest thou well to be angry ? ” Are we not disposed to murmur at God’s dispensation, and in a hasty spirit wish ourselves out of the world ? Is there no gourd, no earthly comfort, on which we have foolishly placed our affections, and for the loss of which we are inconsolable ? Are we not ready to say, What good shall my life do me, since the desire of my eyes is removed ? We ask again, “ Doest thou well to be angry ? ” O, vindicate not such pride and petulance as this ; but confess your guilt, and implore forgiveness !

The history will teach us to rejoice in the rich and sovereign mercy of God, who can pardon returning sinners, even when their case seems desperate. Let not “ our eye be evil, because He is good.”* Rather let us praise Him, when those, whom we gave up as lost, are found,—those, who were dead, are alive again.† But, alas ! like Jonah, we can feel much more for our own trifling concerns than for the glory of God, and the salvation of our fellow-creatures. Do we wonder at the forbearance of God toward his perverse servant ? O, forget not your own ingratitude and obstinacy ; and then be astonished at the patience which he has exercised toward you. Still he strives with you ; and still you grieve his Spirit. O, when will this warfare cease ? Are you not longing for your full deliverance from the body of sin and death, when you

* Matt. xx. 15.

† Luke xv. 32.

shall offend and dishonour your God no more, but love and obey Him, without weariness or imperfection, for ever ?

The subject may appear uninteresting to those who neither lament nor perceive the sad depravity of our nature, and who ridicule the complaints of such as are oppressed with a painful sense of it. But, could they be prevailed on to give a serious and minute attention to what passes within their own minds, they would soon discover that matters are worse with themselves than they apprehend, and would see enough to fill them with surprise, and shame, and horror.

But let not the case of Jonah be abused. You are pleased, perhaps, to hear of the failings of good men, as you hope on this ground to excuse or palliate your own iniquity. You are well satisfied with yourselves; you acknowledge indeed that you have your defects, yet think it a sufficient plea that none of us are perfect. But we warn you, that sin, if not sincerely renounced, hated, and repented of, will bring down the curse of a just and holy God. It is true, "the flesh lusteth against the Spirit" in the most excellent persons.* Yet they "walk not after the flesh," for they are waging continual war against it. On the contrary, you perform a willing service to it; and therefore that sentence lies in full force against you, "If ye live after the flesh, ye shall die."†

* Gal. v. 17.

† Rom. viii. 1, 13.

H E Z E K I A H.

CHAP. XI.

Hezekiah, his accession to the throne—began the work of reformation—kept a remarkable passover—destroyed idolatry—prospered—eminent in faith—attacked by Sennacherib—prepared for a vigorous defence—his unbelieving apprehensions—his application to God—delivered from the Assyrians—magnified in the sight of the nations—struck with a mortal sickness—miraculously recovered—praised God—visited by Babylonian ambassadors—sinned—reproved—humbled and pardoned—died lamented.

WHILE we contemplate the principal characters in Scripture, we are presented with a view of the church of God in different and successive periods of time. It has passed, we find, through various and considerable changes of situation; but, amidst all its dangers and distresses, the same watchful eye has been attentive to its wants, the same almighty hand stretched out for its defence. “Many a time have they afflicted me from my youth up, may Israel now say, yet they have not prevailed against me.”* We have also an infallible assurance that the Lord, “who dwelleth in Zion,” will protect it to the end; for “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”†

* Psal. cxxix. 1, 2.

† Matt. xvi. 18.

The kingdom of Judah, in which alone the true worship of God remained, was reduced to a very low state. Its strength had been exhausted by the defeats and captivities which it suffered under the reign of Ahaz: and, through the impiety of that prince, little even of the appearance of religion was left; for the people were sunk into the grossest idolatry. At such a juncture, therefore, what could be looked for but that God would give them up to utter desolation, as he soon afterwards did the kingdom of Israel? Yet we are called to behold his distinguishing mercy to them. Then, indeed, he is generally pleased to interpose in behalf of his church, when all other hopes fail, when human succours are cut off, or prove ineffectual: thus He secures the glory to himself.

He could not be unmindful of his own promise, "I will make the horn of David to bud;"* and therefore, at different periods, in contemplation of his covenant, he restored that favoured family to a prosperous condition. He "raised up the tabernacle of David, that was fallen, and closed up the breaches thereof."† When "He will work, who shall let it?" In a way we cannot devise, He provides suitable means for his own purposes; and, whenever his counsels are ripe for execution, the proper instrument is at hand. No good could have been expected from the immediate descendant of Ahaz: but we behold his son and successor, Hezekiah, eminent for wisdom, piety, and zeal. The history will encourage us to hope, when matters seem

* Psal. cxxxii. 17.

† Amos ix. 11.

desperate; and should excite us to pray, that He, who has all hearts "in his rule and governance," would stir up the spirit of princes, to maintain and promote his cause in the world.

Years before Hezekiah came to the throne in the vi-Christ, 726. gour of youth, when he was only twenty-five years old.* At such an age, men in general are eager to gratify their passions, and can ill resist the temptation to sensual pleasures, which the accession of wealth and power will ever furnish. But let persons of rank, even in early life, contemplate this exemplary pattern, and learn to "flee youthful lusts." Though his education, probably, was extremely unfavourable, he began his reign as if he had been long established in religious principles; for his very first concern was to abolish idolatry, and to call back his subjects to the knowledge and worship of the Lord God of their fathers. We view with astonishment and delight his readiness to enter upon the arduous work of reformation, his unwearied diligence and steadfast perseverance in it. Immediately he turned his attention to the temple, which had been neglected and profaned; and, after the proper preparations and repairs, he opened the doors of the Lord's house, and restored the public services. The priests and Levites seem to have deserted their post, till their prince remanded them to it. He became a preacher of righteousness to the ministers of religion, with great seriousness of address exhorting them to return to the faithful discharge of their office. Even in the first month of his first year, he himself

* 2 Kings xviii. 1, &c. 2 Chron. xxix. 1, &c.

went up, together with the rulers of the city, to the courts of the Lord, and there celebrated a holy festival with many sacrifices and much thanksgiving to God. An amazing change appeared likewise in the dispositions of the people, for God had prepared their hearts; and therefore, with the utmost alacrity, they joined in the solemnities of worship.

The good king of Judah, encouraged by these attempts, determined to proceed further. He summoned all his subjects throughout the land of Judah, and invited also the Israelites of the ten tribes, who had long been separated from them, to assemble at Jerusalem in the second month, that they might keep the passover together, and by that sacred ordinance renew their covenant with God.* The messengers were dispatched; and the proclamation, which called to penitence and prayer, was published without delay.

We are not surprised, that, in a nation sunk so low as that of the Israelites, a proposal of this nature met with contempt and ridicule. Amongst them the ambassadors were scorned and insulted. Those who are zealous for reformation, in any age or country where ignorance and sin have long prevailed, must look for a similar treatment. Satan has of old practised the same device, and to this day he endeavours to obstruct the usefulness of the faithful servants of Christ, by exciting the laugh of fools against them. Be not, however, discouraged, though you have "trial of cruel mockings." The Lord will honour such as honour Him, and will generally give success to their

* 2 Chron. xxx. 1, &c.

schemes for his glory, though not to the extent, perhaps, which they desire.

Some even of Israel accepted the invitation, and came with unfeigned humility to bow before God. But throughout Judah there was no opposition. The Lord poured out upon them such an influence of his Spirit, that they unanimously obeyed the summons, and an immense congregation assembled, according to the wishes of the king. For fourteen days together the holy solemnity continued, and an uncommon fervour of devotion appeared in all the company. They began with destroying the idolatrous altars, which had been erected in Jerusalem, and then proceeded to sacrifice the passover, and to worship Jehovah according to his own instituted rites. The ministers of religion were diligently employed, teaching the people "the good knowledge of the Lord," as well as offering up their prayers and praises to Heaven. Indeed the zeal of their prince excited them to a pious emulation; for he stood and encouraged them in the faithful performance of their duty.

Several circumstances in their celebration of this festival were not exactly conformable to the original appointment. Many, who had come in haste, especially from the tribes of Israel, were ceremonially unclean; yet they were permitted to partake of the sacred feast, and, through the intercession of Hezekiah, were pardoned and accepted. In cases of real necessity our gracious God dispenses with the observance of his own positive commands; and at all times He requires a proper disposition of the

heart, more than a punctual compliance with external formalities.

The ordinance was ended, but the congregation did not cease from their religious ardour. They spread themselves throughout the land, doubtless under the direction of their prince; and, while they testified their regard to the true God, they took such steps as might prevent the nation from returning to their former abominations.* They brake the images, cut down the groves, destroyed the altars, removed the high places, which even some good kings had winked at, and dashed in pieces the brasen serpent which Moses had erected, because it was abused to the purposes of idolatry.

That the reformation might be complete and abiding, Hezekiah restored the stated services of the temple, required the priests and Levites to preserve their appointed courses, and provided for their future support. In these, and all other regulations for the honour of God and the advancement of true religion, he discovered an unshaken integrity and firmness of mind, and his pious schemes were attended with remarkable success.

And shall such an example produce no correspondent influence upon us? Do we not perceive and admire the excellency of this character? Is it not obvious that one such person may be a blessing to thousands? And shall we not, then, in our respective places, exert our abilities to check the prevalence of iniquity, and to promote the knowledge and worship of God? It is desirable that the fervour and activity of youth should

* 2 Chron. xxxi. 1, &c.

be thus employed. What nobler object can it have? Besides piety in early life promises more extensive usefulness than at a later period. If you begin the work of God betimes, you possess a vigour that will support you in the difficulties of it; and you may be spared for many years, to prosecute and complete your plans. What though long customs and general examples around you oppose your wishes, and seem to represent the case as desperate? Try at least what can be done in the strength of God, and with prayer for his blessing. Call upon others to join their labours with yours, and, if you are intrusted with authority, command their attendance in their proper offices, and exhort them to a faithful discharge of their duty. But you must animate them by your own conduct, and go before them in every laudable attempt, if you expect their concurrence. Many even of your inferiors may deride and insult you; but, if you persevere in spite of contempt and reproach, you will probably see much good produced. Nay, some, whom you little thought of, may be stirred up to carry your designs into effect. "The hand of the Lord" may be upon them to induce their ready compliance. Only endeavour to copy the eminent pattern before you, in this respect; whatever work you begin for the honour of God, do it with all your heart, and doubt not that you will prosper.

We have beheld the zeal and activity of the Jewish prince to restore and establish the stated administration of the divine ordinances in the temple. And shall we not allow that a serious attention and regard to the public services of religion are indispensably requisite in

men of all ranks? We are favoured with the instituted means of grace: the house of prayer is open; and the ministers of Christ "teach the good knowledge of the Lord." But are you thankful for the privilege? Do you not refuse your presence, and despise the worship and the word of God? If your churches were shut, and your teachers removed, would you lament or feel the loss?—The holy solemnities at Jerusalem, were expensive: the long journeys, the tithes, and sacrifices, called for considerable sums of money. Not so the ordinances to which the Gospel invites you. No labour in travelling, no costly offerings, are necessary. Yet we grant that liberality in Christian worshippers is highly honourable, and may be of extensive benefit. Nor will you lose any thing, if, like Hezekiah, you are willing to communicate for the support and advancement of true religion in the world.

The king of Judah prospered in the civil administration of his government; for the Lord, whom he served, gave remarkable success to his political enterprises. He subdued the Philistines, and cast off the yoke of the Assyrians, to whom the nation had been subject. Yet, after some years, it pleased God to try him in a very sharp manner, by suffering his enemies to gain such advantages over him, that he was reduced to the lowest state of distress. This distress, however, tended to display the peculiar excellence of his character, his unreserved reliance upon God: and in no part of his life did he appear more illustrious than at the critical period which we are hastening to consider. Doubtless he possessed other eminent qualifications,

but the sacred historian has distinguished him for his faith above all who sat on the throne of Judah. Nor does God usually permit this grace, where he has bestowed a singular measure of it, to lie dormant. For his own glory, and for the encouragement of others. He brings it forth to public view, and by his severest dispensations shows what support it can administer to the soul. There are few instances recorded, in which the efficacy of believing has been more signally exhibited.

Years before Christ, 713. In the fourteenth year of Hezekiah, Sennacherib, the proud prince of Assyria, provoked by his refusal of submission, made a very formidable invasion into his country, and penetrated nearly to his capital.* He had already destroyed or led captive the ten tribes of Israel; and now he threatened an entire desolation to the sister kingdom. "He came up against all the fenced cities of Judah, and took them."—What, then, was the state of Hezekiah? He prepared for a vigorous resistance, and used the wisest precautions to annoy the enemy and to fortify the town. This might be perfectly right; for the firmest dependence upon God does not render human foresight and diligence unnecessary. When, therefore, he had appointed his captains of war, he exhorted them to sustain the siege with an undaunted courage, from a confident expectation of the divine interposition in their favour. "There be more with us," said he, "than with the king of Assyria: With him

* 2 Chron. xxxii. 1, &c. Isa. xxxvi. 1, &c.

is an arm of flesh ; but with us is the Lord our God to help us, and to fight our battles.”

Yet we are obliged to remark a sad failure in that very principle for which he was eminent. Many of his princes, without consulting the Lord, and contrary to the directions of the Prophet Isaiah,* went to solicit the assistance of the Egyptians ; and we fear this was done by the consent, if not the command, of Hezekiah. But their hopes of relief from this quarter were disappointed : and it is in mercy that God is pleased to defeat the plans of his people, when they are trusting to the aid of men. How frequently has that sentence been verified. “The strength of Pharaoh shall be your shame, and the trust in the shadow of Egypt your confusion !”—When these succours did not arrive, the king of Judah seems to have given way to a sinful distrust. Alas ! we mourn for his weakness ; but we have not known a believer, whose faith has never staggered. Instead of engaging, and simply relying upon, the Lord’s protection, he impoverished himself, and robbed the temple of its treasures and ornaments, that he might bribe Sennacherib to withdraw his forces. The scheme, however, soon failed ; and we rejoice to find, that, when his troubles increased upon him, he did not then waver, as he had done before, but maintained an unshaken dependence on his God.

A short time after, Sennacherib, intent upon the destruction of Jerusalem, sent his generals with an

* Isa. xxx. and xxxi.

immense army to invest the city, and to summon Hezekiah to surrender. They came to the very walls, and, by an insolent and blasphemous message to him, ridiculed not only his expectations from Egypt, but his trust in Jehovah. They called upon the people to go forth, and desert the prince, who could no longer defend them, and promised them a state of plenty and security under Sennacherib. To this, however, agreeably to Hezekiah's direction, no answer was returned; for what would it avail to argue with those who are not afraid to vent their profaneness against God?

The pious king of Judah felt inexpressible distress.* He perceived that his situation was most critical, and that without a divine interposition he must fall a prey to his enemies. No country had been able to withstand the arms of the proud Assyrian; and, while Jerusalem itself was surrounded by his numerous hosts, not one friendly ally came to its assistance. Yet Hezekiah had a place of refuge, to which he then fled for safety. With outward tokens of humiliation and godly sorrow, he went up to the temple, probably in a public manner, accompanied by his nobles, and sent to solicit the fervent intercessions of Isaiah for their relief. He received an immediate reply from the Prophet, full of encouragement and consolation, declaring, in the name of Jehovah, that the profane and insulting tyrant should soon be constrained to depart from them, and should perish by the sword.

The promise, doubtless, afforded a sufficient ground for confidence: yet deliverance was delayed, and the

* 2 Kings xix. 1, &c. Isa. xxxvii. 1, &c.

Assyrians were still permitted to rage against God and his people. Hezekiah had a fresh summons from them to surrender, and a letter from Sennacherib, expressing the most impious irreverence and defiance of Jehovah. He seems to have been more distressed by these indignities offered to his God than by his own difficulties. Again he betook himself to the throne of grace, and with increasing ardour of devotion. He spread the letter before the Lord, and thus referring the cause to his decision, besought Him to interpose, and not to suffer his own glorious name to be any longer insulted. The prayer of faith must finally prevail. The Prophet was commissioned to confirm the divine promises to the king, and assure him of speedy relief. Accordingly, that very night the Angel of the Lord went forth, and instantly destroyed no less than one hundred and eighty-five thousand of the Assyrian army. The blaspheming tyrant, being utterly confounded, fled away with disgrace, and left an immense spoil behind him. He escaped to his own land, but there he perished miserably by the hands of his sons. Ah ! how vain is it to contend against Jehovah ! “ The triumphing of the wicked is short.”

This very singular history exhibits a strong proof of the efficacy of a firm trust and confidence in God. He will afflict, but not forsake, his people. He may reduce them to such extremities, that all hope may seem to be taken away. But those are the seasons in which He generally appears for the manifestation of his power, faithfulness, and love. In the mean time they are required to evidence their simple and unreserved depend-

ence upon Him, and by fervent supplication to implore his help. It is well when our troubles drive us to our knees ; for thus only can we expect his gracious promises to be fulfilled in our deliverance. The example of Hezekiah teaches us “ that men ought always to pray, and not to faint.” But does it not reprove our unbelief? How unwilling are we to rest on the declaration of Jehovah ! How desirous to know in what way He will save us ! How impatient, when relief is delayed ! But it is the peculiar province of faith to derive support from God, when all human resources fail ; and to wait for the completion of his word, though we see not how it can possibly be accomplished. “ Lord, help our unbelief !” For how much does it prevent our comfort and advancement in religion ! How often does it hinder and discourage us in prayer !

This signal deliverance, by the manifest interposition of the God of Israel in favour of his servant, excited the wonder and attention of surrounding nations. They looked with the utmost veneration to the man who had been so remarkably distinguished by Heaven, and were eager to conciliate his regard by many valuable presents. Thus, after a severe trial, “ he was magnified,” and enjoyed a large measure of riches and honour, even to the end of life. “ O, love the Lord, all ye his saints : for the Lord preserveth the faithful, and plentifully rewardeth the proud doer. Be of good courage, and he shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the Lord.”*

* Psal. xxxi. 23, 24.

But, in addition to the invasion of Sennacherib, and about the same time, Hezekiah suffered another very sharp affliction. A sudden attack of a dangerous disease brought him to the confines of the grave ; and a message from God also bade him prepare to leave the world,* inasmuch as the sickness, in its kind and tendency, was certainly fatal. Here, again, he betook himself to God as his only refuge, and poured out his soul with importunate supplication for a longer continuance in life,

We admire the ardour of his devotion, expressed on that occasion, but are surprised at his unwillingness to die. Is there any thing truly terrible in the prospect of departure, to those who are accepted of God in his covenant? Is it not dishonourable to their character to discover any fears of the change, or any strong attachment to their present state? But, surely, pious persons, as well as others, through the common infirmities of nature, may shrink back from their dissolution : and only in proportion to the liveliness of their faith will eternity appear desirable to them. Not to insist, however, on this consideration, the peculiar circumstances of Hezekiah's situation might justify the earnestness of his wishes, and petitions for a recovery ; not so much on his own account as on that of the church and nation, for which he was deeply concerned. It would seem, doubtless, a matter of triumph to his enemies, if he should be cut off at such a critical juncture, and, as it might be construed, under the divine displeasure. Judah would be left without a guide,

* 2 Kings xx. 1, &c. Isa. xxxviii. 1, &c.

exposed to all the fury and violence of the Assyrians. The reformation, also, which he had introduced, was then only in its infancy, and consequently so weak, that he might have reason to dread a general return of the people to idolatry, upon his removal. The honour of God, therefore, was connected with his life ; and on this ground, with a view to further usefulness, he might properly ask for the stroke to be averted or delayed. Besides, it is probable that at the time of his sickness he had no child, and that the succession was unprovided for. Perhaps he feared that the family of David, to which the promises were made, would be extinct, and therefore that the expectations of the Saviour would fail. Distressing apprehensions of this kind might well constrain him to weep and to pray.

This part of the history, however, holds out to us fresh encouragement to cry unto God in our troubles. How astonishing have been the effects of prayer ! Hezekiah received an immediate answer from Heaven, by the Prophet Isaiah, assuring him of the divine favour and determination to defend him from all his enemies, declaring also, that on the third day he should be perfectly restored, and that fifteen years should be added to his life. For the cure of his disease an application was directed, which, though suitable in itself, the power of the Lord only rendered successful : and, for the confirmation of his faith, the shadow of the sun was carried back ten degrees, and the light considerably protracted in a miraculous manner.

On such a subject it becomes us to pause, and inquire, What think we of death ? Should any mortal

sickness attack us, are we ready? Soon will the summons be irrevocably issued out, "Thou shalt die, and not live." What, then, will be our hope, when God shall take away our souls? Is it not necessary now to "set our house in order," and to settle both temporal and spiritual concerns? Have we done this? Or are we not immoderately attached to the world? For what end do we desire to be spared any longer? Or are we answering any useful purpose here?

Perhaps we have been raised, like Hezekiah, when our recovery seemed impossible. Then what returns are we making? Better had it been for us to have been cut off years ago, than to persevere in the habits of sin. The king of Judah showed the warmest gratitude for his deliverance. He went up to the temple to celebrate the divine goodness; and the sacred hymn written by himself, in which he expressed his pious affections upon that occasion, is handed down to us.* Shall we not say with him, "The living, the living, he shall praise thee, as I do this day?" The vows of the Lord are upon us; O let us be mindful of them, and use our restored strength for his glory!

Hezekiah has hitherto appeared, not indeed a spotless character, but one of peculiar eminence. Yet the inspired historians have remarked a defect in his obedience, soon after his recovery, for which he was very sharply reprov'd and threatened by God himself. His declension, however, was not of any long continuance, nor of so gross or notorious a kind as to expose him to the reproaches of the world. The Lord God sees

* Isa. xxxviii. 9—20.

the inward workings of our minds ; and it is possible we may depart from him, and come under his displeasure, whilst our outward conduct is approved and admired amongst men.

The impressions of gratitude, which he felt upon his miraculous cure, were of short duration ; and, perhaps from a conceit of his own importance on account of the distinguished favours he had received, “ his heart was lifted up.”* In such a disposition he was ill prepared to resist a temptation which flattered his vanity. The king of Babylon, probably to court his friendship, sent ambassadors to him with large presents, and letters of congratulation on his very extraordinary restoration from sickness. Hezekiah might have shown them all proper civility and kindness without violating any principles of religion. But he seems to have been carried away by pride, and foolishly to have exulted in the honourable notice taken of him. Instead of instructing these idolatrous princes in the knowledge of Jehovah, he made a display of his own grandeur before them, and with much self-flattery and conceit exhibited his palaces and treasures. Ah ! how prone we are to assume a consequence to ourselves, and to rob God of his glory ! Are you not in danger of being lifted up, especially when God prospers you, and of forgetting to whom the praise is due ? This is highly displeasing to Him, and may bring upon you the heaviest calamities. Be afraid, then, of looking on your houses, your furniture, and possessions, except with devout thankfulness to God, and a holy suspicion of yourselves.

* 2 Chron. xxxii. 25, &c.

Does it appear strange, that he, who had discovered such a firmness in religious principles, should be overcome by the smiles of a Pagan monarch? Alas! "Man, being in honour, hath no understanding." But, waving this consideration, we are never secure without the support of divine grace. If that good influence be withdrawn, the most eminent saints will fall from their steadfastness. Thus the sacred historian has explained the declension of Hezekiah: "God left him to try him, that he might know all that was in his heart." Probably he had not conceived himself to be so vain and foolish; and this sad experience of the depravity of his heart might have a salutary effect, by producing more genuine humility, faith, and love.

Thus also we account for some awful instances of misconduct, in very excellent persons among ourselves. Their attainments and perseverance in righteousness are to be ascribed to the continual assistance of the Spirit. But, if He desert them, they are liable to be carried away by every temptation. He will not, indeed, leave them utterly, or with any other view than to promote their greater good. Yet this representation abases our pride, convinces us of our need of "the blood of sprinkling," and teaches us to "walk humbly with our God."

The least deviation from holy principles is hateful to God; and therefore Hezekiah's vanity did not pass unnoticed or unpunished. Isaiah was dispatched with a solemn reproof and denunciation of wrath against him and his people. It is frequently observed, that offenders are chastened even by those things and persons

which have caused them to transgress. Thus it was declared that the very men, to whom he had paid his court, should seize upon all his boasted treasures, and reduce his descendants to the meanest captivity. Ah! what an unwelcome message to an ambitious mind! Yet we rejoice to see the meek behaviour of the king under this rebuke. He humbled himself before God, and thus obtained a respite. He was then assured that the threatened desolation should not come in his days; which constrained him to cry out, in admiration of the distinguished mercy extended to him, "Good is the word of the Lord concerning me." What other evidence of contrition can we give but an unreserved confession of our guilt, an acknowledgment of the justice of the sentence by which we are condemned, and earnest cries for the remission of our sins? Have we such proofs of the truth of repentance?

Hezekiah, then, was almost instantly recovered; and his sincerity appeared not more before, than after, his fall. We adore the grace which can pardon and restore a backslider. From that time he continued uniformly steadfast in the practice of righteousness, and increased in power, riches, and honour, during the sequel of his reign. The nation enjoyed singular prosperity under his government; and when he was taken from them at the appointed period, they felt his loss. They bore testimony to his exalted worth, for "they buried him in the chiefest of the sepulchres of the sons of David, and did him honour at his death." A better recompense awaited him in the world of glory; and,

at the resurrection of the just, he will receive the public approbation of men, of angels, and of God. Who does not say, "Let me die the death of the righteous?" Then, "be followers of them, who through faith and patience inherit the promises," and "give diligence to make your calling and election sure."

MANASSEH.

CHAP. XII.

Manasseh came to the throne very young—established idolatry—practised witchcraft, and other Pagan impieties—a bloody persecutor—taken prisoner to Babylon—his repentance, prayer, and forgiveness—restored to his kingdom—gave full proof of his conversion—but could not repair the mischief of his former conduct.

FROM the piety, zeal, and diligence of Hezekiah, in the work of reformation, which we have been contemplating, we were ready to promise a long continuance of religion and happiness to the kingdom of Judah. But our expectations are disappointed, and we behold the utmost desolation suddenly introduced. Here, then, the wise man's assertion is verified, "One sinner destroyeth much good."* Hezekiah had been many years rearing a stately edifice, and with much care and labour had just brought it to perfection, when an enemy entered and laid it in ruins. But what impious hand dared to demolish that goodly structure, which he had been so anxious to erect? This surprises us the more: it was one of his own house; it was one pro-

* Eccles. ix. 18.

ceeding from his own bowels ; it was “ Manasseh his son, who reigned in his stead.”*

Years before Christ, 698. He came to the crown when he was but twelve years old. It was a misfortune to him and to the public that he was deprived of the guide and instructor of his youth at so early a period. Yet we might have expected that his father’s example would have left a strong impression upon him, even at that age ; and that the religious friends and tutors, to whose care he was committed, would have been a considerable restraint. It should seem, however, that, immediately on his accession, he began to set aside the excellent regulations which had been established, and soon became the patron of idolatry, and of almost every species of iniquity.

We stand amazed, and ask, Where is the advantage of a good education ? Alas ! something more is wanted to fix and preserve right principles in the heart. The depravity of human nature is sufficient to break down every barrier ; and sometimes it appears the more violent and desperate for having been subject to a temporary control. Hence, perhaps, many young persons, when released from the strict injunctions of teachers and governors, have discovered a singular effrontery in wickedness ; but, surely, it is a high aggravation of a sinner’s guilt that he disregards the instructions and admonitions he has received, and departs from the ways of righteousness, in which he was trained up. The prayers, the counsels, and examples of pious parents, which might have been a peculiar blessing,

* 2 Kings xx. 21, xxi. 1, &c. 2 Chron. xxxiii, 1, &c.

will prove the curse and condemnation of thousands. O that children would consider their present favourable opportunities, and the account they must render to God!

Who will not allow the extreme and total degeneracy of man, while he reviews the folly, madness, and complicated crimes, of the former part of Manasseh's life? Forsaking the worship of Jehovah, and not even permitting it among his subjects, he rushed at once into all the absurd and vile abominations of the Heathen, and established them in his own nation. He renewed the idolatrous altars and groves, which his father had destroyed, and bowed down to the image of Baal, as well as to all the host of heaven. Not content with practising this profaneness himself, he seduced his people into it, till they became worse than the ancient inhabitants of Canaan, who had been extirpated for the very same things. It appears strange that idolatry has prevailed in every age of the world, and amongst the greatest number of the human race. Where is our boasted reason, and the excellency of our understanding, since we are so ready to depart from the true God, and to pay divine honours to a creature? Such a religion as this is as disgraceful to man as it is odious and provoking to Jehovah.

It is mentioned as an aggravation of Manasseh's impiety, that he introduced his Pagan rites into the temple of the Lord, and even set up an image of Baal in the very place where Jehovah had fixed his peculiar residence. We wonder at such an instance of daring presumption. How could he enter those sacred walls,

and not feel the sharpest reproof? Or could he ever forget to whom that house was dedicated? Divine worship was thus utterly subverted, and the Lord God himself excluded from his own habitation. What was this, but, as it were, to insult him to his face, and to challenge him to vindicate his honour against the idols which were exalted above him.

Manasseh, in the progress of his reign, became a father: but how base his character in that relation! Some at least of his children he devoted to the gods of the Heathen; "he made them pass through the fire." It has been supposed that they were offered up in sacrifice, for such a custom, we know, prevailed.* But it has also been maintained that they were only by certain superstitious ceremonies dedicated to some false divinity, whom they were taught to acknowledge. The true God, then, was set aside, and in His stead the very devils were consulted. Accordingly the king proceeded to such a length as to practise witchcraft, and deal with evil spirits. We inquire not of what sort that intercourse is, which Satan and his infernal company have been permitted to hold with men. The reality of it is sufficiently evident from the prohibitions of God himself."†

If any thing more can be added to complete the sum of Manasseh's wickedness, it is this consideration, that he was a cruel oppressor, and a bloody persecutor. He must, indeed, have been actuated by an uncommon degree of ferocity and rage, for "he shed innocent blood very much, till he had filled Jerusalem from one

* Psal. evi. 37, 38.

† Deut. xviii. 10—12.

end to another." What rendered this wanton barbarity the more atrocious was, that he exercised it, most probably, against the faithful servants of Jehovah, and in contempt of their solemn admonitions. The Lord sent Prophets to warn, reprove, and threaten him; yet neither he nor his people would hearken. He persisted, with the utmost obduracy, in all his vile practices, as if he defied the indignation of Heaven. The awful declarations of God's messengers could not but be very offensive to him; and perhaps with a view to get rid of these troublesome monitors, and to extirpate all their adherents, he put such immense numbers of them to death. It is supposed that the venerable Isaiah, who had been his father's friend and counsellor, fell a sacrifice to his fury, and that he was "sawn asunder," as a peculiar example of vengeance. How much more enviable the state of the martyr than that of the royal murderer! This avowed opposition to the calls of God constituted the worst part of Manasseh's character, and seemed to point him out as ripe for ruin. How many are, in like manner, rendered inexcusable, by the repeated warnings given them! "This is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil."* "If I had not come," said the Saviour, "and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloak for their sin."†

What then do we learn from this black picture? Does it not mortify our pride, to observe how far we may depart from truth and righteousness? We see,

* John iii. 19,

† xv. 22.

from one instance and another, what folly, cruelty, profaneness, and presumption, man is capable of, even under the greatest advantages. Have you been preserved from such enormities? Be thankful that you were not exposed to the temptations which have ensnared others; but lay your hand upon your mouth, under a conviction of your own extreme depravity. Enough you yourselves have done, to strip you of every plea before God.

From the atrocious wickedness which marks the former part of Manasseh's life we could have expected nothing but the most tremendous consequences in the conclusion. The Lord, indeed, had testified by his Prophets that his fierce anger was kindled, and that He would take signal vengeance. We ask, then, what became of Manasseh? "He, that, being often reproved, hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy."* This were just in every case; but, in many instances of the kind here described, the claims of justice are withdrawn, that the rich and sovereign grace of our God may be the more gloriously displayed: thus "mercy rejoiceth against judgment."† In the history before us, the scene suddenly changes; and, when we were looking for utter destruction, we behold an astonishing salvation effected. The view is so wonderful, that it excites the most devout admiration, and constrains us to cry out, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!"

* Prov. xxix. 1.

† James ii. 13.

Manasseh received a severe chastisement for his iniquity. The providence of God so ordered it, that the Assyrians were stirred up to invade his land, and he was given into their power. They took him prisoner, deprived him of his glory and kingdom, led him in chains to Babylon, and there probably cast him into a dungeon. That situation, so disgraceful and afflictive, under the influence of God's Spirit proved salutary to him. In that state of retirement he was awakened to reflection; he saw and confessed the baseness of his conduct, and cried unto God for pardon. Then the haughty rebel was subdued; and, after having exhibited a sad specimen of human depravity, he has afforded an instance of the freeness and extent of the divine mercy. Then the seeds of a pious education, which seemed to be lost, began to revive, and the prayers of his deceased father to be answered.

We are not told at what period of his life this alteration was brought about. He had previously persisted in a long course of sin; and it was a happy circumstance that many succeeding years evinced the reality of his repentance. We pretend not to account for the change on any other ground than the exertion of an almighty power. It was "the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes." Yet even what God himself does, He is pleased in most cases to accomplish by external means; and afflictions are often made use of in the great work of conversion. To recover men from the error of their ways, He separates them from their evil companions, and deprives them of their

former temptations and opportunities of wickedness : by heavy pains and disappointments He bows down the pride of their hearts, and convinces them of the bitterness of sin ; and, not unfrequently, He places them in retirement, to review and mourn over their past folly and madness. Thus many are subdued by suffering, who have obstinately resisted the milder methods of God's dealing with them ; and then they reckon their severest chastisements among their choicest blessings.

Yet afflictions do not necessarily produce such changes as this, but derive all their energy from the influence of God's Spirit, through which alone they prove effectual. Some persons are the more hardened by their trials ; and, when " the hand of God presseth them sore," they discover greater enmity and rage against Him. Thus it is recorded of Ahaz, the grandfather of Manasseh, " in the time of his distress did he trespass yet more against the Lord."* Thus also, in those extreme and endless torments reserved for the finally impenitent, there will be no proper contrition, no humiliation. " They gnaw their tongues for pain, and blaspheme the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and repent not of their deeds."†

The account of Manasseh's conversion is short, but satisfactory ; " He humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers." The review of such a life, we readily allow, would furnish him with sufficient matter for the exercise of godly sorrow. But every real penitent, who has a right apprehension of the heinousness of sin, will feel the same occasion for self-abhorrence

* 2 Chron. xxviii. 22.

† Rev. xvi. 10, 21.

as Manasseh. Though you have not committed those gross offences which are mischievous to society, you are polluted by natural depravity, and your actual deviations from the law of righteousness very justly expose you to the divine wrath ; so that, if you understand your own state and desert, you will not scruple to adopt that confession, " Behold, I am vile !" This will be the very first effect of true repentance.

Under a deep sense of his guilt, Manasseh cried for mercy. " He besought the Lord his God, and prayed unto him." The sacred historian again and again takes notice of his prayer, which probably was most fervent and incessant. Nor can we conceive that there is any spiritual conviction, or unfeigned humiliation, where there are no ardent supplications of pardon. What more suitable expression of a contrite heart than " God be merciful to me a sinner !" Such an importunate application to the God of all grace is a favourable sign, and determines the character of a convert. For thus it was remarked of Paul, as an indisputable evidence of his change, " Behold, he prayeth."*

" If ye seek the Lord, He will be found of you."† How many memorable instances verify the assertion ! Manasseh stands as a conspicuous example of the readiness of our God to accept and to save the returning sinner. " The Lord was entreated of him, and heard his supplication." His numerous and aggravated offences were all blotted out ; and the poor culprit, trembling before his Judge, was lifted up, and comforted

* Acts ix. 11. † 1 Chron. xv. 2. Deut. iv. 29. Matt. vii. 7.

with the hope of forgiveness. O what a proof is here that with Jehovah "there is plenteous redemption!"

God was graciously pleased to put Manasseh's sincerity to the trial; for, by a peculiar providence, "He brought him again to Jerusalem," and restored him to his kingdom. There he recovered his former dignity, and continued to reign for many years. We are anxious to hear, then, if, when his affliction was removed, he retained his religious impressions, and persevered in a holy obedience. Nor are we left in doubt: full testimony was given that he was "renewed in the spirit of his mind, and created in righteousness and true holiness." There may be instances of real conversion, at a late period, where no such satisfactory evidences are afforded. Hereafter, we presume, God will make them public, and justify himself in them, to the admiration of all.

"Then Manasseh knew that the Lord He was God." Could he possibly be ignorant of this? Had he not been early grounded in good principles? Had he not heard of his father's zeal to revive and establish the worship of Jehovah? Had he not been informed, and could he forget, that "the Lord had made bare his arm," delivered Hezekiah from the Assyrians, and lengthened his life for fifteen years? Or were not these events a sufficient proof that "the Lord He is God?" Alas! with a pious education, the most excellent instructions, and a full view of the strongest testimonies in favour of religion, man may abide in darkness, neither will he attain any true spiritual acquaintance with God, till "the eyes of his understand-

ing be enlightened." Then, as in Manasseh's case, "God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, shines in the heart, to give the knowledge of the glory of God, in the face of Jesus Christ." The information we have received from others should not suffice us; but we should pray, that, by "the manifestation of the Spirit," we may know the Lord.

Such a discovery of the divine nature and perfections will be of a practical tendency, and produce the best effects in regulating the conduct. The succeeding behaviour of Manasseh was consistent and honourable. Not to dwell on his prudent attention to the defence of his dominions, we admire his zeal in endeavouring to repair the mischief he had done. He set himself to banish the idolatry which he had introduced. All those surely, who abhor their iniquity, will cease from it, and exert their influence to recover others. What shall we say, then, to such as are utterly unconcerned about the spiritual state of their friends and dependants, and have not themselves forsaken their old sins? Shall we credit their loud professions of penitence, or encourage their confidence in the divine forgiveness? Rather we should solemnly warn them to "bring forth fruits meet for repentance," without which their professions are an insult to God, their confidence the grossest presumption.

The real convert rests not in a mere negative reformation; but, when he "ceases to do evil, he learns to do well." Manasseh was zealous to restore the service of Jehovah. The temple had been polluted by Pagan rites, and all the true worshippers of God had

been either slain, or forced to hide their heads. But the holy place was now opened again for its original purpose, and the king himself appeared there, to declare his devout regard, and to offer sacrifices, to the Lord. Do you hope, that you also, like Manasseh, have been humbled greatly for your former contempt of religion? We expect to see you diligent in your exertions to promote it. You will recommend "the faith, which once you destroyed," and, by your own serious attendance at the house and ordinances of God, will encourage others to come. Without such positive fruits of righteousness, such a public testimony of your principles, we may justly doubt of your inward renovation.

Manasseh was solicitous to bring back the people to the Lord, and therefore commanded them to serve Him. He had seduced them into idolatry, and other impious practices; and now he anxiously desired them to return with him to that God, "from whom they had deeply revolted." Is it not also incumbent upon us to give a similar evidence of our sincerity? For, how many have we tempted to sin! Doubtless we should endeavour to reclaim them: at least, we should declare our own compunction of heart for what we have done, and call their attention to that religion, which we find so necessary for ourselves. But, if we are afraid or ashamed to maintain the cause of God before those whom we have induced to transgress, we possess not any proper regard to Him, or any strong sense of the evil which we have committed.

It should be remarked, however, that no reformation can atone to God for our offences, or take away their

bad effects in the world. Repentance has been said to be the only consideration required for our pardon. But what recompense is this for the dishonour we have cast upon God? or what satisfaction to his justice? Or how can we compensate for past failures by that which is no more than our present duty? The Jews themselves were taught that "without shedding of blood is no remission." We can add, "there is none other name under heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved," but only the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; "in whom we have redemption THROUGH HIS BLOOD, even the forgiveness of sins."*—Men foolishly talk of making amends for their transgressions. Let them try, as Manasseh, to repair the mischief, and they will soon find it impossible. Doubtless much good must have followed from his zealous endeavours, but by no means all that he wished, or all that he might probably have effected, had he served the Lord from his youth. It should seem that many would not forsake their idolatry, in which he had instructed them; and some years afterward the heavy judgments of God desolated the nation, on account of his former wickedness, even though he had obtained forgiveness for his own soul.† You also, who are reconciled to God, and have confidence before Him, may be unable to prevent the temporal and everlasting destruction of those whom you have seduced. Go, and recover them if you can. Some of them, perhaps, have died in their sins, and are lost for ever: and, of those who

* Heb. ix. 22. Acts iv. 12. Col. i. 14. † 2 Kings xxiv. 3, 4. Jer. xv. 4.

remain, how few will hear you ; or, hearing, regard your admonitions ! Posterity for ages yet to come, may reap the bitter fruits of your iniquity. Who will not allow, then, even from a view of the mischiefs produced in society, that “ sin is indeed exceeding sinful ? ”

May we presume to suggest a reason for the divine procedure, in selecting men of such an abandoned character as Manasseh to be the objects of mercy ? We confess the counsels of God are a great deep, which we cannot fathom : yet some considerations upon the subject demand our attention. By such instances as these the Lord affords the most striking exhibition of the nature and sufficiency of that salvation which He has effected by the incarnation, sacrifice, and intercession of his own Son. Since there is no difference, in the terms of acceptance between one sinner and another, nay, since “ where sin hath abounded, grace doth much more abound,” we are compelled to join in that conclusion, “ Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy, He saved us.” Examples of this kind, indeed, are most offensive to persons of a Pharisaical disposition ; because they perceive herein, that, in this respect, at least, no account is made of their boasted righteousness, and no preference allowed them in the sight of God.

These cases, however, afford encouragement to the awakened penitent ; and they seem to be recorded, that none may despair of being received in God’s appointed way. While He suffers some to go the greatest lengths in wickedness, and then recovers them,

He shows that "our Redeemer is strong," and "mighty to save." Who, now, that returns to God in penitence and faith, shall doubt of obtaining pardon, "though his sin be as scarlet?" The atonement provided can expiate the most aggravated guilt; and thousands have experienced its efficacy. Or who shall say that our spiritual enemies are invincible? The Saviour, as we have seen in this history, can sanctify the most polluted heart, and give power and ability to overcome the most inveterate habits of evil. Through His grace the fury of the lion is tamed, and succeeded by the meekness of the lamb: the place where Satan erected his throne, and maintained an undisturbed dominion, becomes an habitation for God. "Surely, shall one say, In the Lord have I righteousness and strength: even to him shall men come; and all that are incensed against Him shall be ashamed."*

* Isa. xlv. 24.

JOSIAH.

CHAP. XIII.

Josiah, his early accession to the throne—piety—zeal for reformation—fulfilled a prophecy at Beth-el—restored the temple service—how affected, upon hearing the law—read it to the people, and bound them by covenant to God—celebrated the passover—possessed unequalled zeal—wounded in fighting against the king of Egypt—lamented at his death.

TRUE religion, which in every part of life is amiable and useful, is particularly so in youth. At that age temptations to sensual pleasures are the strongest and most numerous ; and then to resist the most importunate solicitations to evil, and, amidst an universal degeneracy of manners, to discover a firm and zealous attachment to the service of God,—to prefer the enjoyment of his favour and the advancement of his glory to every worldly consideration,—this is real excellence, a sight which even angels look down upon with delight. This, however, is an attainment to which no principles of our depraved nature will lead us ; it requires a large measure of divine grace. O may that grace be poured out upon our rising generation ; for so may we expect a revival of truth and holiness amongst us !

Years before Josiah, the king of Judah, will afford us Christ, 641, a beautiful example of early piety, and of its beneficial effects. Upon his accession to the crown, we had every thing to fear concerning that corrupt nation; but a gleam of hope suddenly breaks in upon us, while we behold his good dispositions and unwearyed exertions. Manasseh, his grandfather, had not been able to reform all the profane practices which he himself had introduced; and, soon after his death, the pleasing appearances of religion, which the people had assumed in compliance with their prince, were all thrown off. Amon, the next in succession, renewed the former idolatries through the land, but, after a short and wicked reign, fell by the hand of violence; and Josiah, then only eight years old, was placed upon the throne.* What could we look for from such a child, especially from one surrounded with temptations and examples of iniquity? But it proved a mercy to him that he was so early delivered from the influence of his abandoned father; for the care of his education from that period, probably, was committed to persons of virtuous principles, under whom he might receive the best instructions and impressions.

No particular account is given of him till the sixteenth year of his age; but then we are assured his heart was truly affected with divine things, and the seeds of piety sprang up with uncommon vigour. "While he was yet young," says the sacred historian, "he began to seek after the God of David his father." His tutors might be the means, but the effect itself we

* 2 Kings xxii. 1, &c. 2 Chron. xxxiv. 1, &c.

ascribe entirely to the distinguishing mercy and powerful grace of God; since this is a temper of mind which man by nature possesses not; "There is none that seeketh after God."* At the very time when his passions were coming to their full strength, and all external circumstances were favourable to schemes of sensuality, Josiah dedicated himself to the service of his God, and was chiefly solicitous to please and to glorify Him.

What an exemplary pattern is here! We inquire of those in early life, Have you, like Josiah, consecrated your first and best years to God? Have you yet entered on a religious course, or even formed the plan of "seeking the Lord?" Ah! what means your levity and contempt of every thing serious? Is it for old persons only to be devout? And will you be content to give the refuse of your days to Him who made you? You plead your own peculiar snares and difficulties; but surely they are not greater than Josiah's were. When you consider his case, you will not say it is impossible to "remember your Creator in the days of your youth," but rather allow that this is the most proper season of all.

Some indeed, who appeared to begin well, and discovered an ardent zeal, have grown weary, and declined. Not so Josiah. His pious fervour was not a sudden and transitory flash, but a bright and steady flame, which long afforded an extensive light. At the age of twenty, and sooner perhaps he did not undertake the direction of public affairs, he called upon his people

* Rom. iii. 11.

to join with him in serving the Lord, and exerted his whole strength and influence to promote those principles, the importance of which he had himself felt. We contemplate with delight the labours of this indefatigable prince in reforming a corrupt nation, and recovering them once again to the worship of Jehovah.

Years before Christ, from 630 to 624. In the twelfth year of his reign, he set himself to purge away the various abominations which had spread throughout the land. It should seem that he was diligently employed in this work to the eighteenth year, and that his good designs were not brought into effect till that time. Some of the grosser irregularities were corrected before; but then an entire abolition of idolatry, and of every thing pertaining to it, took place. The altars, the images, the groves, and the vessels made use of in their Pagan rites, were utterly destroyed: their priests also, who had supported these corruptions, were put down with marks of infamy, and many of them slain with the sword. It is obvious that he had to conflict with very formidable difficulties; but the fervour of his zeal carried him through them all. He was not satisfied with issuing out his orders, or sending his officers to accomplish this change, but he himself went in procession through the kingdom, to see his commands executed. Still we should wonder that he met with no violent oppositions, did we not ascribe his success to the overruling influence of God upon the minds of the people.

We should pray that God would endue the princes of the earth with the same spirit. It is surely in their power to hinder the commission of much evil;

and, doubtless, they must answer for their connivance at the profane practices of their subjects. But, leaving them, we should inquire rather, if we, in our several spheres, are using our utmost endeavours to prevent sin. Though you are not kings, magistrates, or preachers, have you no authority? Are there none whom you might and should restrain? Are there no friends and acquaintance, living in ignorance and habits of wickedness, for whose dangerous condition you ought to be deeply concerned? Perhaps they will listen to your instructions, counsels, and reproofs. Make the trial at least, from a regard to God, and your labour shall not be in vain. Is it proper in any case to attempt a reformation? Then why should not this work begin with you? If the love of ease, or fear of opposition, render you averse to it, how unlike are you to Josiah!

It is remarkable, that in these zealous exertions he did not confine himself within the limits of his own particular dominion in Judah; for he exercised a similar authority in the cities of Israel, which were then subject to the Assyrians. By some means he had obtained permission for this purpose, that he might extend his usefulness the further. It is unfaithfulness, cowardice, or sloth, which prompts us to ask how far we are obliged to go, and makes us utterly indifferent about those who are not expressly committed to our charge. If we are under the full influence of religious principles, like Josiah, we shall say, Are there any others of my fellow-creatures whom I can benefit, any sinners whom I may recover to God?

Whilst he burnt the bones of the idolatrous priests upon Jeroboam's altar at Beth-el, he fulfilled the divine prediction, in which he himself was described by name, and by which that particular office had been assigned him, three hundred and fifty years before; and it should seem that he was ignorant of the prophecy till he had literally accomplished it.* How wonderful is the knowledge of God, who sees through ages to come, as well as those which are past and whose plans of operation, therefore, are not liable to mistakes, imperfections, or changes, as ours are! "Known unto Him are all his works, from the beginning of the world."

Josiah was solicitous, not merely to correct irregularities, but to establish real godliness in the nation. He must have beheld, with much distress, the neglect and profanation of the temple; and therefore he commanded the proper officers to repair the building, for which large contributions had been collected, and to restore the appointed services in that sacred place. Such a concern for the observance of public worship will ever be the fruit of a pure zeal for God, and of a strong regard to the interests of religion; for by that institution, chiefly, the knowledge of divine truth is diffused, and the practice of holiness promoted in the world. What thanks and praise do we owe to God for the regular and quiet administration of his ordinances amongst us! Are we sensible of their value? Do we indeed rejoice and bless God that houses of

* 2 Kings xiii. 2. † 2 Kings xxiii. 15—20.

prayer are erected throughout our land ; that they are not shut against us, or applied to profane purposes ? Let us offer up our petitions that our privileges may be continued to us and our posterity : and, while we are favoured with them, let us labour to improve them to our own spiritual advantage. Let us “ serve the Lord with gladness, enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise, be thankful unto Him, and bless his name.”*

During the repairs of the temple, Hilkiah the high-priest found the book of the law (probably the original writing deposited in the ark by Moses); and so much had the word of God been neglected, so scarce were the copies of it, that the king himself, and even the ministers of religion, seemed unacquainted with its contents. When it was presented to Josiah, and read before him, he discovered emotions of great anguish ; for then he perceived, more than he had done, how very far the whole nation had departed from God, and to what tremendous denunciations of wrath they were exposed. Under this impression he sent to inquire of the Lord whether it were possible in any way to avert the threatened vengeance. The divine oracle, by Huldah the Prophetess, declared that destruction should be poured upon Jerusalem and its inhabitants without remedy, for their long-continued provocations ; but that the pious prince, who had shown such tenderness of heart, and deep humiliation before God, should be mercifully removed from the evil to come.

* Psal. c. 2, 4.

This is an instructive narration in all its circumstances. It will teach us to value the word of God, and to be thankful for the frequent opportunities which the poorest amongst us enjoy of hearing and reading it for ourselves. The times are bad indeed when the Bible is put away or forgotten. An ignorance of religious principles will ever be favourable to the prevalency of iniquity; for, if the solemn menaces of God against it are not known, there is no effectual barrier to restrain men from it. Yet, numerous as the copies of the sacred Scriptures are amongst us, we fear that many receive no advantage from them. The book of revelation is studiously kept out of sight, or thrown aside as troublesome or useless furniture; and in some families it seems to be no more understood than it was in the days of Josiah,

Others, who have acquainted themselves with the main subjects of it, evidently disregard its most awful declarations. Are there not those, who laugh at the very mention of those torments which are prepared for the ungodly? Ah! where is that tenderness of heart which appeared in Josiah? Come and learn from him to attend to the threatenings of God with real seriousness of mind, to weep and to pray when you hear to what punishment you are liable. Surely your contempt of the curses of Scripture manifests an utter disbelief of the whole. Were you truly persuaded that God means what he says, you could not but be deeply impressed: you would cry out, as the king of Judah, "Inquire of the Lord for me; for great is the wrath of the Lord that is kindled against us." Such an

inquiry, perhaps, never entered your thoughts : you seek not after the way of salvation, because you feel no apprehensions of danger : a plain proof that the word of God passes with you for a fable.

Do you ask, To what purpose should we thus humble ourselves ? Let Josiah's example answer : you will obtain peace and security. If you mourn with real contrition, you will be accepted through the Redeemer ; and then, whatever may be the case with others, you shall not come into condemnation. Hear the declaration of Jehovah, " To this man will I look, even to him that trembleth at my word."* The world may deride you for a supposed weakness of understanding ; but the God of heaven will approve your conduct. " The prudent man foreseeth the evil, and hideth himself ; but the simple pass on, and are punished."†

No sooner did Josiah perceive the importance of the book of God, than he desired to acquaint his subjects with it. He summoned all the elders of the nation, the ministers both of church and state, and all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and went with them in solemn procession to the temple ; nor was he ashamed to appear as a preacher before them.‡ He read in their ears those awful denunciations of the divine law, which had made so strong an impression on his own heart. There also he bound himself by an express covenant to serve the Lord with a steadfast and unreserved obedience, and required the whole congregation to enter into the same engagement. The greater part, we fear, yielded

* Isa. lxvi. 2. † Prov. xxii. 3. ‡ 2 Kings xxiii. 1, &c.

a hypocritical compliance ; yet much good, doubtless, was effected ; nor was there any open or gross departure from the Lord during the sequel of this reign.

It is of as much importance now, as it was in the days of Josiah, that the people be called together to be instructed in the oracles of God, that they be exhorted to dedicate themselves to Him, and seal their vows before Him. If you love God or your fellow-creatures, you will rejoice when the glad tidings of salvation are carried from one place to another, and sinners are taught "the word of reconciliation." But do you labour to promote this purpose, and contribute to it by your influence and example ? If you wish others to hear the Scripture read and expounded, you too should be willing to hear them, and, like Josiah, appear at the head of your family in the house of God, and there publicly declare your resolution to be "his faithful soldiers and servants unto your life's end." You will not be satisfied that the preachers of the Gospel perform their office, but in your respective departments you will "be fellow-helpers to the truth." You will set up religion in your own habitations, endeavour to acquaint your children and domestics with the book of God, and press them all to "join themselves to Him in a perpetual covenant," No difficulties, reproaches, or opposition, should discourage you from thus attempting to render yourselves useful in your generation, by an exertion of your best abilities. Nor should you doubt of success : at least much evil will be prevented, and perhaps the hearts of many may be truly engaged to serve the Lord,

The prince and the people had bound themselves to God by the most express promises in the temple. But Josiah was desirous that their vows should be ratified in a still more solemn manner, by a public celebration of the passover.* That was their grand ordinance, and had probably sunk into neglect; but then, throughout the kingdom, they were called to the strictest observance of it. The piety and zeal of Josiah never appeared more eminent than on that occasion. He was the foremost and most active in the work of God, not only requiring the attendance of his subjects, but instructing and encouraging the priests and Levites in the discharge of their office. An immense multitude assembled, and, through the liberality of Josiah and his nobles, numerous sacrifices were offered to Heaven; and in the whole festival the utmost regularity and seriousness prevailed. This passover was the most remarkable of any which had been observed from the days of Samuel; perhaps on account of the large company then present, and their compliance with the minutest circumstances of the original appointment: for that in the time of Hezekiah, though celebrated with much fervour, was not exactly conformable to the law of Moses.

It has been said that religion concerns only the common people, and serves as a state engine to keep the vulgar in awe. But has this been the sentiment of the truly wise and good in any age or country? "The excellent of the earth," even those of most exalted rank, have not thought the divine service be-

* 2 Chron. xxxv. 1, &c.

neath their notice, but, from a conviction of its importance for themselves, have endeavoured to promote a general attention to it. Did the king of Judah plead an exemption ; or shall we suspect his sincerity in this transaction ? Was his ardour on the occasion a reproach to his character ? No ; it is recorded to his honour ; and it should be our desire to possess the same spirit. We do not solemnize the Jewish ordinance ; but we should wait on the Lord in his own instituted way. “ Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us, therefore let us keep the feast ;” * let us surround his table, and, on the ground of his covenant, bind ourselves by a vow to be his for ever.

We have seen Josiah’s liberality in forwarding the work of God ; and shall we decline any necessary duties of piety, merely because they are expensive ? It is incumbent upon us to “ honour the Lord with our substance ;” and this may be effected by various methods, though in the worship of the Christian church no costly offerings be required. “ Let us not be weary in well-doing.” “ The liberal deviseth liberal things, and by liberal things shall he stand.” †

Thus lived and prospered this amiable king, steadfastly persevering in righteousness. He was an extensive blessing in his day ; and he seemed to be raised up of God, on purpose that one more solemn warning might be given to the people of Judah before their entire desolation. They complied with his regulations ; and the service of Jehovah continued to be maintained

* 1 Cor. v. 7, 8.

† Gal. vi. 9. Isa. xxxii. 8.

in its purity. But the generality of his subjects practised the basest dissimulation in their religious professions.* There was therefore no remedy; for soon afterwards the threatened destruction came upon them, and they were carried captive to Babylon. "Be not deceived: God is not mocked." You may assume fair appearances, and conform to the external rites of devotion; but, if you "turn unto the Lord feignedly," you will fall under the heavier condemnation.

The character before us was most amiable, and is said to have been unequalled, not indeed in every respect, but in one leading feature. Josiah surpassed all others in his zeal and activity to promote the honour of God. His whole heart was engaged in the work of reformation, and all his strength put forth to accomplish it. It was remarked also, of his pious ancestor, Hezekiah, that there was none like him for the firmness of his trust and confidence in God. The most eminent saints, though they possess other good qualities, are generally distinguished for some particular excellence, which attracts our notice and admiration. In each of them we perceive the efficacy of the grace of God, and see cause to be ashamed of our own sad deficiencies. May we so contemplate their examples, as not only to commend, but imitate, every thing valuable in them!

Years before Thirteen years after the last-mentioned Christ, 610. transactions, Josiah went forth to battle against the king of Egypt, who was passing through

* Jer. iii, 6, 10,

his land to attack the Assyrians. He has been warmly censured for undertaking the expedition ; but perhaps we are not sufficiently acquainted with the circumstances to decide upon his conduct. There might be political reasons which would justify him as a statesman ; but probably he acted without due deliberation, and consulted not the Lord or his Prophets. Good men are liable to be betrayed into a wrong spirit ; and God may sometimes permit them to follow foolish and evil counsels, in order to punish those with whom they are connected. It was so in the present instance, as we shall learn from the very awful event. Josiah received a mortal wound in the engagement, and died as they conveyed him from Megiddo to Jerusalem. Doubtless he was removed in mercy to himself, that he might not behold the approaching desolation of his country ; but in judgment to the people, who, notwithstanding the piety of their prince, were ripening for destruction. They were constrained, however to confess his worth, when he was taken from them : and, while they felt their very heavy loss, they mourned for him throughout all the nation with expressions of deepest sorrow. It is truly lamentable that men in general know not the value of their own blessings, till they are deprived, in righteous punishment, for their contempt and abuse of them.

If we censure Josiah's last expedition, we should be warned from it to watch over our conduct, and the tempers of our minds. Though we be established in grace, yet, if at any time we be remiss and negligent, we may be cut down in a way which will be highly

dishonourable to our profession. "Therefore, be ye also ready;" be doing the work of the Lord, that, when he shall call, you may not be surprized or terrified, but cheerfully obey the summons; and, by the strength and ardour of your faith and hope at that solemn season, may instruct and comfort your surviving friends.

But if you are living in an habitual disregard of God and his salvation, in what manner can you meet your dissolution? Place the awful scene before you: imagine the time of your departure at hand: are you not confounded? What is your support? Can you look at death with composure and confidence, and say, "I am persuaded that it shall not be able to separate me from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus my Lord?" Do you not rather tremble in the "fearful looking-for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries?" O, seize the present moment, and flee to Him, whose grace can so prepare you for your dismissal, and invigorate you in it, that you may even then adopt the Apostle's triumph, "O, death, where is thy sting?—Thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."*

* 1 Cor. xv. 55, 57.

J E R E M I A H.

CHAP. XIV.

Jeremiah, called to the prophetical office—joined with Josiah in promoting reformation—delivered from the men of Anathoth—discouraged—apprehended and arraigned—acquitted—sent Baruch to recite his prophecies—wrote to the captives in Babylon—his conference with Zedekiah—imprisoned—favoured with revelations—his bold reproofs when released—cast into a dungeon—consulted by Zedekiah—rescued by Ebedmelech—continued in prison till Jerusalem was taken—favoured by Nebuchadnezzar—dwelt in Judea—carried into Egypt.

THE history of the Jewish nation exhibits the conduct of divine Providence in a most instructive light. While we behold the Lord, with a parental care, “rejoicing over them to do them good,” notwithstanding their perverse and rebellious spirit, we are convinced that “He is gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy.” But the terrors of his justice, also, were displayed towards that favoured people; for, when various means had been used in vain to humble and reform them, they were given up in righteous judgment to utter destruction. We learn, therefore, that He will at last avenge himself on those who continue to

trifle with his grace : and the weight of his vengeance is generally proportioned to their contempt and abuse of his goodness.

Is it inquired, "Wherefore was the Lord wroth with his inheritance?" Their offences were numerous and complicated ; but one sin, above all others, brought on their ruin, and, as it were "filled the measure of their iniquities :"—"They mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his Prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against his people, till there was no remedy."* Those holy men were raised up in succession, from age to age, to reprove them and call them to repentance ; but their admonitions met with a marked abhorrence : "all the day long they stretched out their hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people." In the upright discharge of their office, "they had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings : yea, moreover, of bonds and imprisonment : they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword."†

It were easy to produce particular instances : let the example of Jeremiah serve as a specimen of the rest. This was a character of peculiar eminence ; and a larger account of him than of the others is left us in the book which bears his name, and which was doubtless composed by himself. We shall advert to some of the most remarkable circumstances of his life and preaching ; and, though a narrower inspection into his writings would more clearly show that in him "the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant," our short

* 2 Chron. xxxvi. 16.

† Heb. xi. 36, 37.

detail will exhibit him as a pattern of ministerial fidelity, courage, and assiduity, sweetly tempered with patience, meekness, and love. Such advocates for the truth of God are among the best blessings which he can bestow on any people; but the rejection of them is a decided proof of a rooted enmity against Him, and will draw down his heaviest displeasure. May we fear for ourselves, and know the day of our visitation, that the Gospel, which we hear, may be to us "the savour of life unto life!"

Years before Christ, 629. Jeremiah was invested with the prophetic office at an early age, and is even said to have been sanctified and ordained to it before his birth.* He continued in the faithful execution of his duty, during the reigns of the five last kings of Judah, for the space of forty years, and for the greatest part of that time endured much bitterness of opposition. He was raised up as an assistant to the pious Josiah, in the arduous work of reformation, and was then first appointed to the sacred charge, when that monarch began to purge the nation of its idolatries. "No man taketh this honour to himself:" the most eminent servants of God have been backward to accept it: nor do we read of any, but false prophets only, who thrust themselves uncalled into the ministerial function, or embraced it as an easy or lucrative employment. Jeremiah refused it through a modest diffidence of himself, pleading his youth and want of eloquence: "Ah! Lord God," said he, "behold I cannot speak, for I am a child." His objections, however, were overruled by the gra-

* Jer. i. 5, &c.

scious declarations of God himself, who engaged to qualify him for his office, to support and protect him in it. He saw in a vision the desolations which were to be brought upon Judah by the Chaldeans ; and he was required to warn both the princes and the people that their abandoned conduct had provoked the Lord to destroy them. Such a message could not but be most offensive to them : accordingly, he was told that their utmost rage would be excited against him ; and yet, though bonds and afflictions awaited him, that he should be rescued from all their furious assaults. Doubtless the prospect of his sufferings occasioned many painful feelings ; but the strongest courage and confidence became him, to whom that promise was given, “ They shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail against thee ; for I am with thee, saith the Lord, to deliver thee.”

Immediately he stood forth as a preacher of righteousness, and seconded the king's attempts for the restoration of true religion by the most solemn addresses to his countrymen on the evil and the danger of their ways. In that instance he had the civil authority on his side, which added weight to his exhortations, or at least secured him from insults. Indeed, from the united efforts of such a prince and such a prophet, we should have formed the most pleasing expectations of success. Yet the work of reformation advanced very slowly ; and through that whole reign little more appears to have been effected than an external change. The people were restrained awhile from their gross irregularities, but were ready to return to them again.

The ministers of Christ should be thankful when the power of the magistrate is extended to protect them from the fury of such as would oppose them. But the support of government alone cannot render their labours efficacious. O that the divine influence may accompany their words! Otherwise, though sinners may be checked, they will not be converted.

Jeremiah, probably, met with no open persecution till the death of Josiah. But from that period his situation was very different, and his whole history seemed to illustrate and exemplify God's original declaration to him: "They shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee, saith the Lord, to deliver thee."

He had to contend with malicious enemies in his native place, among the priests of Anathoth and his own kindred. They were so far provoked by his bold admonitions, as to determine in the most treacherous manner to destroy him. He, indeed, suspected not their purpose; for he was like a lamb or an ox brought to the slaughter: but the Lord watched over him, and rescued him out of their hands, by giving him timely information of their designs.* It usually happens, to those who are zealous for religion, that their foes are of their own household: and perhaps none are more likely to be offended, by the pious labours of the faithful ambassadors for Christ, than those teachers who possess not the same fervency or diligence.

The Prophet referred his cause to God, and then with renewed vigour, though forbidden to prophesy any

* Jer. xi. and xii.

more, reprov'd the men who had intended to murder him, and denounced the heavy judgments of God against them. Yet it should seem that he felt some discouragement from the late attempts upon his life, and complain'd to God with an appearance of impatience. But he was remanded to his work, and bidden to prepare for severer trials.*

He went on, therefore, in the execution of his office, declaring the whole counsel of God, and, by a variety of significant actions as well as alarming sermons, warn'd the nation of their impending ruin. But after a time his conflict was so sharp, through the bitterness and rage of that abandoned people, that his faith fail'd him, and he betray'd a peevishness of spirit in murmuring at his appointment to so hard a post.† We do not vindicate his expressions, for we allow that much imperfection remains in the best characters. Jeremiah was sanctified from the womb; yet he felt the depravity of a fallen nature. For surely it was no other than unbelief and a petulant discontent which led him to complain of the difficulties of his work. Alas! how prone we are to find fault, when we meet not with the success which we expected! Do not our trials evince the weakness of our religious principles?

The Lord had compassion on his servant, and, while He required him to return to the faithful discharge of his duty, renew'd the former promises of support and protection. How gracious is our God, who bears with our infirmities, and is not provok'd by our perverseness utterly to desert us!

* Jer. xii. 1—6.

† xv. 10.

The Prophet was again perplexed and almost confounded by the insults, hardships, and dangers, to which his office exposed him. He solemnly declared before the princes, the priests, and the people, that they would be given as a prey to the Chaldeans for their impenitence and obduracy. But his admonitions rendered him extremely offensive, and raised up enemies against him on every side. They derided his message, as if it were the fictions of his own brain, and consulted how they might asperse his character, and even take away his life.* Pashur, a priest and a principal minister in the temple, proceeded with much rage to beat and imprison him.† On the very next day, indeed, Jeremiah was released; and then, by express revelation from the Lord, he predicted the captivity and miserable death which awaited his furious persecutor. But such a general and bitter opposition quite disheartened him, and stirred up some wrong tempers within him. He relates, with a beautiful simplicity, the painful conflict which he suffered, the fears and discouragement he felt, and the hard thoughts he had entertained concerning God, though at times the confidence of his faith was unshaken.

We mourn for the weakness of the man of God; but we know how to account for it. He is not chargeable with any open inconsistency or dishonourable conduct in the execution of his office; but so strong were his secret corruptions, that he found it extremely difficult to persevere. We admire the humility and ingenuousness with which he has described the very

* Jer. xvii. 15, xviii. 18, 23.

† xx. 1, &c.

sinful emotions of his own mind. Alas ! who among the saints of God, in circumstances of violent temptation, has not experienced the same ? Do they not all confess, "The evil, which we would not, that we do?" Even while their outward deportment before men is unexceptionable, they frequently discover the most detestable thoughts and principles working within them, which almost overwhelm them with distress, and deter them from approaching to God. At those seasons, however, the Lord is gracious in preventing their inward depravity from breaking forth into such acts as would "give great occasion to their enemies to blaspheme." Let them renew their application for pardon and strength, and, like Jeremiah, prosecute with fresh vigour the duties of their calling.

From that period we hear no more of any impatience or weariness, though his difficulties were not in the least diminished. No sufferings, no bitterness of persecution, discouraged him from making a bold and unreserved declaration of the divine will. He reprov'd, he threaten'd, not in the spirit of anger or private resentment, but as the messenger of Jehovah God of hosts. Let us contemplate his zeal and fidelity, till we ourselves be animated by the same holy ardour, and be willing to endure the severest trials "for conscience towards God."

Years before In the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign, **Christ, 610.** while he preached repentance to the people in the courts of the Lord's house, and foretold the destruction of the temple and city, as the punishment of their obduracy, he was violently seized by the priests

and prophets, and dragged as a criminal before the tribunal of the princes.* There he stood undaunted, maintaining that he spoke only the words of God, and warning his very judges to take heed to themselves. Nor was his meekness less conspicuous than his courage. "As for me," said he, "behold, I am in your hand: do with me as seemeth good and meet unto you." The elders were inclined to favour him, and even pleaded his cause against his enraged accusers. He was, therefore, honourably acquitted, chiefly indeed through the influence of one person, Ahikam, whom the Lord had made use of for the preservation of the Prophet. He escaped from their fury, but we apprehend that his liberty was abridged.

He experienced other deliverances equally astonishing, which are to be ascribed to the gracious interposition of God. Some necessary hindrance, probably the strict prohibition of the king and his counsellors, prevented him from repeating his admonitions in the temple. But, that another call might be given to that infatuated nation, Baruch was directed to supply his place, by reciting in the most public and numerous assembly the substance of Jeremiah's predictions and exhortations, which he had taken down from his mouth.† This awakened the attention of the princes, who immediately carried information to the palace. Jehoiakim required the book to be read before him; but the contents soon roused his indignation. He destroyed the writing, and commanded the Prophet and his scribe to be seized, with an intent, doubtless, to destroy them.

* Jer. xxvi. 1, &c.

† xxxvi. 1, &c.

But his mad purpose was defeated : for being under the care and protection of Jehovah, they were in some way or other so effectually concealed as to elude the search of the officers. Jeremiah's safety in this instance was owing, not to his own vigilance or good management, not to the contrivance or interest of friends, but to the immediate and miraculous agency of God himself. "The Lord hid them."

He had narrowly escaped ; yet he declined not the further execution of his office. By the divine direction he wrote down another copy of those very declarations which had incensed the king, adding also the most awful denunciation against him for his late conduct ; and then gave this fresh transcript to Baruch, probably to be published as before. This must have been done at the peril of their lives ; but, as we hear of no other attempt against them, we conclude that the fury of the persecutor was restrained by the powerful influence of Heaven.

Years before Jeremiah saw the threatened vengeance Christ, 599. take place upon the impious prince and his son who succeeded ; for they were both carried captives to Babylon, together with many of their subjects. That event, though it confirmed his words, was very afflictive to him. He felt the tenderest compassion for his exiled countrymen, and therefore sent to them by letter to comfort them in their bondage.* He entreated them not to give heed to seducing prophets, who encouraged them to expect a speedy deliverance ; for he assured them from the Lord that they must continue

* Jer. xxix. 1, &c.

seventy years in that state of banishment. In the mean time he exhorted them to seek the peace and welfare of that city where they sojourned, and to wait in faith and prayer for the completion of the divine promises.

He remained at Jerusalem, and had the same painful task to perform as before. For, during the whole reign of Zedekiah, he was called to contend with that abandoned and infatuated king, with the false prophets also, with the priests, and the nobles: nor could he look for any other recompence than stripes, imprisonment, and death. But he pleaded the cause of God, and in obedience to him hesitated not to endure all things.

Zedekiah was placed in the government of Judea by Nebuchadnezzar, and compelled to swear allegiance to him.* To this oath Jeremiah exhorted him strictly to conform, in opposition to all those lying teachers, who with their pretended divinations, encouraged him to throw off the yoke of subjection.† Those deceivers, therefore, were enraged against the messenger of Jehovah; but he continued, notwithstanding all their contempt and violence, to declare the will of Heaven. He maintained that it would be vain as well as impious to resist the Babylonish monarch, and that, upon their rebellion against him, they should be given up to utter desolation. Still Zedekiah listened to his flattering counsellors, and by his perfidy provoked Nebuchadnezzar to invade the land and besiege the city.

Then, indeed, the king in his distress felt and testified a high respect for the Prophet; for he sent to en-

* 2 Chron. xxxvi. 10---13.

† Jer. xxvii. and xxviii.

treat his intercession with the Lord.* Alas! how many wish for the prayers of good men, and yet reject their advice! Jeremiah could not go beyond the word of the Lord; and therefore, while he preached the necessity of unfeigned repentance, and of submission to the Chaldeans, he predicted the fatal effects of the present opposition.† But his admonitions were despised, or rather they excited the utmost rage against him: for he was cast into prison, as a disaffected and seditious person.

Do we commiserate his opprobrious confinement? Even there he enjoyed the comforts of the divine Presence, and received fresh communications from Heaven.‡ As a proof of his full confidence that the land would be restored to their descendants at the appointed period, he purchased a family estate, and gave directions for the preservation of the writings concerning it. In answer to his fervent supplications, the Lord confirmed the former revelations made to him, declaring, that, though Jerusalem should be utterly destroyed for its wickedness, it should be rebuilt and established in a state of great prosperity. He was also assured that the Redeemer should yet arise from the seed of David, according to the promise, and that under his spiritual government the church should possess an enlargement, security and happiness, unknown before. Such a foresight of the blessed times of the Gospel would, doubtless, fill the mind of the Prophet with “joy and peace in believing.”

* Jer. xxi. 2, xxxvii. 3. † xxi. 3, &c. xxxiv. 1—7.

‡ xxxii. 1, &c. xxxiii. 1, &c.

A short respite was granted to Jerusalem ; for the Chaldeans withdrew their forces to attack the Egyptians. In that interval Jeremiah was released ; but, when he perceived that both the king and the people still hardened their hearts, and became even more obdurate through the delay of the threatened vengeance, he admonished and reprovèd them with the same firmness and courage as before.* He maintained that Nebuchadnezzar would certainly return, renew the siege, and destroy the city. Upon the first assault, a reformation in one instance had taken place among them. By the command of Zedekiah, the slaves had been liberated from their oppressive service, and their freedom confirmed to them by all the formalities of a solemn covenant before God.† But, when the Chaldeans retired, the holy covenant was perfidiously violated, and the slaves reduced to their former subjection. Jeremiah, therefore, in God's name, represented to the princes their base treachery ; and declared that for this, in addition to their other enormities, accumulated miseries were coming upon them, and that an escape would be impossible. His plain dealing, doubtless, provoked their indignation ; and an opportunity soon offered, which showed their malevolence against him.

During the cessation of hostilities, whilst he was permitted to be at large, he attempted to depart from Jerusalem, and to seek a retreat in the country. Perhaps he was wearied out with that long, and as it should seem fruitless, struggle he had maintained against an abandoned people ; and, amidst the many

* Jer. xxxvii. 6, &c.

† xxxiv. 8, &c.

distractions likely to ensue, he might wish for solitude and ease. But his scheme failed; for he was instantly seized by a guard, under a charge of deserting to the enemy; and, after being contumelious^{ly} beaten, was thrust into a dungeon, where he continued for some time, with extreme danger of his life.

At length his sufferings were mitigated. Zedekiah retained a reverence for him, and took him from his cell to consult him. He received from him no favourable answer; and yet he so far attended to his earnest expostulation on the injustice and severity of his confinement, as to appoint him to a less rigorous custody, and to command that he should regularly be supplied with provisions, while any remained in the city.

But his trials soon increased. Some of the elders of the people were violently enraged against him, on account of his preaching. They represented him, therefore, as a turbulent fellow, whose life should no longer be spared, and, through the weakness of the king, they obtained leave to wreak their vengeance upon him.* Immediately they let him down into a deep miry dungeon, where he was on the point of perishing. But again he was rescued, through the unexpected mediation of Ebed-melech, an Ethiopian eunuch in the palace, and restored to his former more favourable imprisonment. Nor did that act of piety and kindness lose its reward; for God declared that he would protect the man who had loved and delivered his Prophet.†

The prisoner was admitted to another conference with Zedekiah, nor was he backward to repeat his faith-

* Jer. xxxvii. 1, &c.

† xxxix. 15—18,

ful admonitions. But the prince continued impenitent, and Jeremiah wore his chains, till Jerusalem fell into the hands of the Chaldeans. Inconceivable distress, confusion, and carnage, attended that event; but the arm of Jehovah was stretched out for the defence of his servant.* Even Nebuchadnezzar, the proud conqueror, gave express directions that a peculiar regard should be shown to Jeremiah, and full liberty allowed him to choose his abode.

Doubtless, from a desire of usefulness, as well as an attachment to his country, he fixed his residence among the few people who were left in the land. But his pious labours did not succeed with them. They professed to reverence him, entreated his prayers, and solemnly promised obedience to his word.† Yet, when he charged them to continue in Judea, assuring them that God would prosper and bless them there, but threatening them with entire destruction if they should seek protection in Egypt, their hypocrisy appeared. In contempt of God and the Prophet, they retreated to Egypt, and compelled Jeremiah to accompany them.‡ There likewise he persisted in reproof and warning them; foretelling also the approaching ruin of that very nation to which they had fled for safety. Ah! what distress and horror must have filled his mind, while he was witness to their increasing obduracy and profligacy of manners! He could not be silent! yet no man regarded; and it has been thought that he died at last as a martyr, and sealed his prophecies and doctrines with his blood.

* Jer. xxxix, 1—14. † xlii. 1, &c. ‡ xliii. 1, &c.

How honourable was the character of the Lord's servant, in the midst of all the indignities and violence which he suffered! How much instruction may we derive from the review of his conduct, and the various occurrences of his life! In whatever station we are placed, we learn from him to consult the will of God, and steadfastly to adhere to His commands, in opposition to the whole world, and in contempt of our own present conveniences and comfort. Our faith is confirmed, and our hope animated, while we observe the astonishing deliverances wrought for the persecuted Prophet: we are emboldened to rest upon the promises of God, and to believe that, in a strict attention to our duty, "He will never leave us nor forsake us." If we are fixed in a private and retired department, the incidents we have met with may not seem so remarkable as those which befell Jeremiah; but the same gracious Providence has protected and supported us; and we also may look back with wonder and gratitude on the way by which the Lord has led us. Has He not raised up friends for us where we least expected them; rescued us from many formidable dangers, and suddenly removed from us those heavy calamities under which we were ready to sink? "He is faithful that promised." Let us not be backward to serve Him, nor shrink from the post which he has assigned us, whatever difficulties or perils may await us in it. Let us confide in his care, and rejoice in his love. He will infallibly perform the engagements of his covenant, and "perfect that which concerneth us."

So far the example before us may admit of a general application, for the instruction and encouragement of all who desire "to obey God rather than men." But it demands a more particular attention from those who "minister in holy things," and who, like the prophets of old, appear in the public and important character of "ambassadors for God." Their commission, indeed, differs from Jeremiah's; but there are many points for resemblance, which may furnish them with profitable hints for the regulation of their conduct. May God pour out his Spirit upon all the pastors of his church and endue them with a measure of the same wisdom, courage, fidelity, patience, and assiduity, which his ancient servant possessed!

You therefore, who are called to labour in the Gospel, should contemplate the life of Jeremiah with peculiar regard. Like him, you are required to declare many offensive truths, to reprove a sinful generation, and foretel "the wrath of God, which cometh upon the children of disobedience." Learn, then, to deliver your message without fear or partiality, and keep back nothing which God has enjoined. Your hearers may tempt you to "speak unto them smooth things," and to be silent on such subjects as excite their disgust. But would you corrupt the word of God, in order to suit their vitiated taste? If you thus pleased men, you would not be the servants of Christ.* Your difficulties may also be increased if you have to address persons of rank and influence; for they may be disposed to consider your plain dealing as an indignity to them.

* Gal. i. 10.

But, while you pay them all proper deference, do not hesitate, as occasion shall be given, to “reprove, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and doctrine.”* O, betray not the cause of God, to conciliate their favour, or to secure your own interest and reputation!

It may likewise happen that in the discharge of your office you may be opposed, and all your solemn declarations denied and ridiculed, by false, though fashionable, teachers. Such was Jeremiah’s trial: O, learn from him to combat their errors with firmness and courage; and to persevere in maintaining the truth, from a full confidence that God himself will vindicate the honour of his Gospel!

You will think yourselves bound to denounce “the terrors of the Lord” against impenitent offenders: but, like the Prophet, you will also speak in words of consolation; and the promises of God will have their proper place and proportion in your preaching. His writings will instruct you to encourage returning sinners by assurances of complete forgiveness, and to exhibit the power and the grace of the great Redeemer, as “THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.” You will contemplate with delight his descriptions of the glory, amplitude, and blessedness, of the kingdom of Jesus,† and earnestly entreat the people of your charge to bow with unfeigned subjection to this Prince of peace. You perceive Jeremiah, in his darkest hours, rejoicing in those spiritual and exalted privileges which are secured by the divine covenant:‡ nor will you fail to

* 2 Tim. iv. 2. † Jer. xxiii. 5, 6. ‡ xxxi. 33, 34. xxxii. 40.

exhort every trembling penitent to take hold of this covenant, while you represent the unchangeable Jehovah as engaging by his promise and his oath to bestow both present and everlasting salvation on all them that believe.

You will not look for the recompense of your labours from men : probably a faithful attention to your duty will procure you many enemies. Wonder not, at least, if you experience a measure of that opprobrious and cruel treatment which Jeremiah met with. The hand of violence may be restrained, but the tongue of slander will vent its poison against you. False and malicious reports may render your character infamous, and seem to obstruct the usefulness of your ministry. In such circumstances, you will have especial need to guard against all improper affections ; and the example before you will teach you to suffer long, and be kind. Forbearance, meekness, and love, even toward your bitterest persecutors, will best prove the excellence of your principles, as well as your own sincerity. You must “not render evil for evil, or railing for railing ; but contrariwise blessing ; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing.”*—“The servant of the Lord must not strive ; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves ; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth.”†

Is it objected that the holy Prophet himself betrayed a petulant and angry spirit, and uttered some tremen-

* 1 Pet. iii. 9.

† 2 Tim. ii. 24, 25.

dous imprecations against his adversaries? * No merely human character can be proposed for our imitation in every instance. The imperfections of the saints, however, warn us to be circumspect. But the ease and office of Jeremiah were extraordinary : as a Prophet, he might speak many things which would be unsuitable to others. Most of those passages, which have the appearance of curses, were no other than predictions of evil, or they expressed only his approbation of the judgments which God had revealed to him. † It will not be said, surely that he was habitually morose and revengeful ; for the whole tenour of his life would contradict it. Did he not labour with uncommon assiduity for the good of those who hated him ? Did he not discover the most compassionate distress, on account of their miseries ; and pour out his heart in fervent prayer for those who were seeking to murder him ? ‡

Are you tempted to court the applause of men at the expense of truth, “ to give flattering titles,” and “ have men’s persons in admiration because of advantage ?” This would be a mean detestable conduct. Rather rejoice “ if ye be reproached for the name of Christ.”—Or, would you consult your ease, and live entirely to yourselves, regardless of the solemn obligations of your office ? How widely, then, do you differ from the Prophet ! And how much more honourable was he, in the midst of stripes and imprisonment, than

* Jer. xvii. 18. xviii. 21—23.

† See the Character of David, page 196.

‡ Jer. iv. 19. viii. 21. ix. 1. xiii. 17. xiv. 7, &c.

those flexible and compliant teachers among ourselves who "are of the world," and who appear the foremost in every scheme of pleasure and sensual gratification!

Does the prospect of difficulties terrify you? Perhaps you magnify your dangers, or forget the promises of your God, who engages to support you. Need we remind you of the astonishing interpositions in Jeremiah's favour, or observe that similar deliverances may be wrought for you? The Lord, whom you serve, may raise up friends for you, even among your enemies; may restrain the men of violence, and confound their purposes against you. He will himself visit you, when most insulted and oppressed; and, probably, He may induce contemptuous sinners to revere you, and to "make supplication unto you." It is not unusual, at least in the present day, for the faithful ambassadors of Christ to be rescued and preserved, beyond their hopes: nor are we at a loss to account for this, while we hear their gracious Master assuring them, "Lo! I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."*

Does your want of success discourage you? We wonder not if in your haste you resolve to abandon that employment which produces no visible good. But if you regard the authority of God, or love your fellow-creatures, the word of God will be "in your heart as a burning fire shut up in your bones, and you will be weary with forbearing."† In obedience to God, and in patient expectation of his blessing, you must continue your labours, and leave the event to Him. Little

* Matt. xxviii. 20.

† Jer. xx. 9.

advantage seemed to be derived from the incessant exertions of Jeremiah. Yet he was greatly honoured, and his reward was with his God. O, be animated to pursue the grand object of your high calling with unremitting ardour ; and, whatever you may lose or suffer in such a service, the issue will be glorious to yourselves ! Let no dangers move you, “ neither count you your lives dear unto yourselves, so that you may finish your course with joy, and the ministry which you have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the Gospel of the grace of God.”* Then shall you join with “ the goodly fellowship of the prophets, and the noble army of martyrs,” in singing praise to Him, “ who giveth you the victory ;” and you shall shine among those, who have turned many to righteousness, “ as the brightness of the firmament, and as the stars for ever and ever.”† Amen.

* Acts xx. 24.

† Dan. xii. 3.

NEBUCHADNEZZAR.

CHAP. XV.

Nebuchadnezzar succeeded to, and enlarged, his father's dominions—his magnificence, pride, and oppression—had a revelation of the kingdom of Christ—set up an immense idol—his conduct to the three pious Jews—warned of God in a dream—yet lifted up—deposed from his government—restored and changed—praised God,

WE are taught by the sacred history to acknowledge the controlling influence, or immediate agency, of a righteous, wise, and Almighty Governor, in every event of human life. Whilst, therefore, the most tremendous commotions are excited amongst men, and kingdoms pass from one possessor to another, we are to consider His hand as sustaining and directing the whole, so that in the highest sense “He doeth according to his will, in the army of heaven and amongst the inhabitants of the earth.” How little is this believed or regarded! An atheistical notion of some unknown blind principle, chance, or nature, has almost excluded the divine Providence from the management of the universe. But the present narrative will furnish us with a striking proof and illustration of that important truth, “God is the Judge: He putteth down one, and setteth up another.”*

* Psal, lxxv, 7,

We have here selected, for the subject of our serious meditation, a remarkable character out of the Pagan world, Nebuchadnezzar the haughty tyrant of Babylon. But we shall confine our attention to those circumstances of his life which are recorded in the Scriptures, and are evidently written for our admonition. He was a bold presumptuous offender, and seems in some respects, like Pharaoh, to have maintained a contest with the God of heaven, till at length he was overcome and confounded. How many testimonies we have that "God resisteth the proud," and that "who-soever exalteth himself shall be abased!"*

Years before Christ, 604. Nebuchadnezzar has been celebrated as one of the most illustrious monarchs, and as a prudent, brave, and successful warrior. He came to the throne of Babylon at an early age; and to the extensive dominions, which he inherited from his father, he made a large addition by his own personal exploits; insomuch that the greatest part of the then known world was tributary to him. "All people, nations, and languages, trembled and feared before him: whom he would, he slew; and whom he would, he kept alive, and whom he would, he set up; and whom he would, he put down."†

The limits of our plan will not permit us to follow him from one conquest to another. Suffice it to observe, this is he, who brought the kings of Judah into subjection, and led away the whole nation in a state of captivity to Babylon. He attacked and subdued

* James iv. 6. Luke xiv. 11.

† Dan. v. 19.

Jehoiakim, according to Jeremiah's predictions, robbed him of his treasures, then left him as his vassal, and afterwards, upon his revolt, vanquished and destroyed him.* He also deposed the young ruler Jehoiachin, and took him to Babylon, after ransacking the city and temple of Jerusalem. He had appointed Zedekiah to the government; but, upon his violating the oath of allegiance, he came against him with numerous forces, invested, reduced, and laid waste Jerusalem, and burnt down its palaces and the house of God.† He apprehended the faithless prince, and, after murdering his sons before him, put out his eyes, and led him in chains to grace his triumph. Thus he made and unmade kings, to gratify his own ambition, resentment, or caprice.

His magnificence and splendour were equal to his power and tyranny. Babylon, the place of his residence, the seat of empire, was the wonder of the world. Its extent, and the grandeur of its buildings, its temples, the height and thickness of its walls, its royal edifices and gardens, which were all improved if not raised by Nebuchadnezzar, have been the admiration of ages.‡ Thus he had reached the summit of human greatness; and if riches, pomp, and dominion, could possibly bestow happiness, he would have been the most favoured of his species. But withhold your judgment till you hear the sequel of this narration; and do not hastily pronounce that the man of wealth and honour enjoys the largest share of felicity.

* 2 Kings xxiv. 1, &c. † xxv. 1, &c.

‡ See Bishop Lowth on Isa. xiii. 19.

Is it inquired, why there is such a difference between one individual and another ; or by what means the Babylonian monarch attained so high an exaltation ? An uninspired historian would direct our attention to the wisdom of his counsels, the firmness of his generals, the valour of his soldiers, or his own uncommon fortitude. But the sacred writers discover to us an invisible Agent appointing and controlling the strange events of Nebuchadnezzar's life, and ascribe all the success of his arms, and his enlarged dominion, to the divine superintendency. In their account this mighty tyrant was but an instrument in the hands of Jehovah ; a servant, whom He sent out with a particular commission ; and whom he assisted to accomplish its purpose. The Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, teach us that God had determined to punish the offences of his people by the insolence and oppression of the Chaldean, and that for this very end he was suffered to go on and prosper.*

How vast and glorious is the government of God, who fashioneth the very hearts of men, and overrules their sinful principles and passions, so as to render them subservient to his own designs ! They may imagine that all things are at their disposal : and doubtless they please and gratify themselves ; for they do not act by constraint. On this very ground they are afterwards chastised for those vile affections, by which they were influenced even in fulfilling the divine will. The opposers and murderers of Christ did that which the hand and counsel of the Lord determined before to be done,

* See 2 Kings xxiv. 2, 3. Jer. xxv. 8—12. xxvii. 6. xliiii. 10.

and yet they were chargeable with the most heinous guilt.* Thus it is, as David instructs us, that the wicked are the sword of Jehovah;† and, when He gives it a commission, no wonder if it devour and lay waste. We should, therefore, envy no man the greatness to which he is exalted : for this is not a mark of any moral excellence in him, or of the favour of Heaven toward him. He may be intended by Providence to accomplish some important event ; but perhaps that grandeur we admire may be his heaviest curse.

There is a proneness in human nature to swell with arrogance, on account of any superior attainments or distinctions. We shall, therefore, very rarely meet with a rich person, who is “ made low.”‡ Such indeed are the snares of riches, that their possessors “ shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven.”§ Power and splendour, also, not less than wealth, draw forth and strengthen the corruptions of the heart. We are not surprised, then, that Nebuchadnezzar, who had risen to such an elevation above his species, and seemed to have brought almost the whole known world into subjection to himself, was of an infamous character, proud, cruel, and oppressive, an obstinate persecutor of the church, and so enormous a sinner as to contend against Jehovah himself. There were instances in which he paid a particular regard to the faithful servants of God ; for, when Jerusalem was desolated, he showed favour to Jeremiah ; and Daniel he preferred to be his prime minister of state at Babylon.

* Acts ii. 23. iv. 28.

† Psal. xvii. 13.

‡ James i. 10.

§ Matt. xix. 23.

But his kindness in these cases is to be ascribed to the constraining influence of God, rather than to any goodness of disposition in him. He must have had opportunities of being instructed in the true religion by the people and the prophets of the Lord, whom he had carried into captivity; and there were seasons when he seemed to feel very serious and strong convictions; yet he continued, for the greatest part of his long reign, a period of forty-three years, to despise and provoke God more and more.

Not satisfied with plundering and destroying the house of God at Jerusalem, he took away the holy vessels, as it were in triumph, to Babylon, and placed them in the temples of his idols. It is probable that many blasphemous speeches were uttered on that occasion, and that the Pagan deities were represented as overcoming the God of Israel. We mention not his cruelties and oppression when he reduced Jerusalem, nor the vile indignities put upon the royal offspring, whom he made eunuchs, that they might serve him in his own palace.* But we are amazed that to a person of such a character a divine revelation was vouchsafed in the visions of the night, predicting the establishment of the kingdom of Christ upon the ruins of the other great empires of the world.† He, indeed, neither understood the meaning, nor so much as recollected the dream; and in the madness of his rage he was about to slay his numerous magicians, because they could not discover it. But, when Daniel declared the secret, the fury of the tyrant subsided, and a sudden

* Dan. i. 1, &c.

† ii. 1, &c.

alteration took place. He who had been wont to receive homage, even from the kings of the earth, fell down with supreme veneration before Daniel, and confessed that Jehovah, whom the Prophet worshipped, was the God of gods and Lord of lords. From such appearances we might have expected an entire change of conduct, a serious and uniform attention to the service of the true God. But, alas ! how frequently are good impressions utterly effaced ! Many may profess a high esteem for the ministers of religion, and yet never really comply with their exhortations. Many may cry out, from a full conviction, " The Lord, He is the God," and yet persist in a state of rebellion against Him.

Nebuchadnezzar remained an idolater, and seemed determined to exceed all others in his superstitions. He set up an object of his own contrivance, for universal adoration, probably with a view to display his superior greatness, and to perpetuate his name.* He erected an immense image of gold, perhaps unequalled for size and magnificence, to the solemn dedication of which he summoned the nobles and officers throughout the whole empire, and required them to worship it, on pain of an excruciating death. What madness and impiety was this ; especially after his declarations of regard to Jehovah, the God of Israel ! There were found, however, three faithful men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, who dared to resist the king's commandment, and boldly hazarded their lives in their attachment to the true God. They were arraigned

* Dan. iii. 1, &c.

and accused before him ; and, while he threatened them with “ the fiery furnace,” he added, in a presumptuous tone, “ Who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands ?”

Here, it should seem, he set himself up as competent to maintain the contest with Jehovah. , But did not their magnanimous confession, their pious fortitude, and the firmness of their faith, at least restrain and confound him ? Alas ! no : having given the challenge, he was determined to carry on the sad conflict, that his own dignity might not be lowered. With the utmost violence of rage and fury he commanded the place of their torment to be prepared with peculiar care ; and, to increase the terror of their punishment, he appointed the strongest of his soldiers to bind them, and to cast them into the furnace. But how mortifying was the event to the pride of this mighty potentate ! His own officers were instantly consumed, and he himself beheld the servants of God walking with safety and composure in the midst of the flames. At length, then, he appeared to submit, blessed God for having prevented the effects of his impious decree, issued out another edict, denouncing the heaviest penalties on those who should oppose the true God, and promoted to honour those whom he meant to have destroyed. The whole of this transaction tended to display the Perfections of Jehovah, and to call the attention of these idolaters to Him. It secured, at least, protection and support to the spiritual Israelites in that Pagan country. But, ah ! what a black picture does it exhibit of human wickedness in the person of Nebuchadnezzar !

Was there not, then, an entire change in his temper and conduct from that period ! Far otherwise : his convictions might be strong, but they produced no real penitence. They might restrain him from persecution, and dispose him to venerate the faithful servants of God ; but they left him under the power of his former vile affections. Still “his heart was lifted up, and his mind hardened in pride.”* In that awful state he lived for many years ; till at length he was warned in a dream, as it were by a voice from Heaven, that a tremendous judgment was coming upon him.† Daniel interpreted the vision, declared that he should soon be reduced from his elevated rank to the most consummate wretchedness, and exhorted him, therefore, if he wished the sentence to be delayed, to break off his sins, and turn to God in righteousness.

So pointed an admonition, we should suppose, must have had some effect. Did the proud sinner, then, humble himself in the dust, or make supplication to his Judge ? Alas ! no external means, neither counsel, reproof, nor threatening, will excite one good disposition till God himself implant it in the heart. At the end of twelve months, the king gave full proof that the whole of his late dream, and the consequent instructions delivered to him by the Prophet, had been entirely forgotten, and that he still continued to exalt himself against Jehovah. He surveyed the splendour of his palace, the strength and opulence of his capital, and the extent of his dominion ; and then, as if

* Dan. v. 20.

† Dan. iv. 1, &c.

he accounted himself a god, and demanded the adoration of others, he uttered that arrogant atheistical speech, "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built for the house of the kingdom, by the might of my power, and for the honour of my majesty?"

The very sound of these impious words may justly strike us with horror. What, then, do we conclude, from the character of this Babylonian monarch? We perceive and confess the extreme depravity of our nature. Such instances of presumptuous offenders have been permitted, in order to show whither our hearts would lead us, and what we also are capable of perpetrating. All men, indeed, cannot sin as Nebuchadnezzar did, because they have not the same opportunities. We may thank God that we are placed in a lower situation, more favourable to the purposes of religion. It will be well if we know and improve our own mercies. But are we not under the influence of the very principle which we condemn in this history? Are we not exalted in our own esteem? Though we possess not the wealth or magnificence of a Chaldean prince, is there nothing of which we are proud and conceited, as if it conferred a peculiar excellence upon us? Are we not elated on account of our fortune, houses, furniture, equipage, or dress? Do we not assume great merit to ourselves, and demand respect from all around us, for our pedigree, our bodily strength, or mental powers, for our knowledge, or, what is still more preposterous, for our piety? We do not, as we ought, make God our all; we do not ascribe all to Him, or use all for Him: and, as far as

we set up ourselves, we take his place, and rob Him of His glory.

How long have we refused to humble ourselves before Jehovah! Have we not, like Nebuchadnezzar, resisted convictions; and determined to please ourselves, whatever the consequence may be? Then we are accumulating a sad load of guilt: and what will the end be? What, but confusion, if not final destruction, to ourselves? For, "Jehovah God of hosts will be exalted in judgment." Be afraid, then, of striving with your maker; immediately drop the vain contest: "be ye reconciled to God."

Years before We admire the divine forbearance towards Christ, 570. the tyrant of Babylon, and wonder that so daring an offender should be suffered to live and triumph so long. But the time of justice came: the haughty sinner was suddenly stopped in his career, and exhibited before the whole world as a public example of the sinfulness and danger of pride. At the very moment when he vaunted himself in his pomp and glory, he heard a voice from Heaven, declaring that he should be deposed from his kingdom, excluded from all human society, and ranked among the beasts of the fields, for seven years, till he should be fully convinced of the absolute and righteous sovereignty of the Lord God omnipotent. This event had been expressly predicted, by Daniel's interpretation of his dream, only twelve months before. But the warning had been despised; and now the threatened sentence was instantly carried into effect: nor could it be doubted, from the previous intimations given, that it was the appoint-

ment of God himself. It is apprehended that he fell into a state of horrid distraction and madness, that his nobles drove him from the government, and that he continued to live at large, after a savage and brutal manner, during the whole of the period foretold. What an humbling stroke was this! What an instructive "spectacle unto the world, to angels, and to men!"

Of all other afflictions which are the lot of humanity, none is more deplorable than insanity. And who shall say that he is secure from that malady? In this view, how little does man, with all his boasted attainments, appear! For, in one moment, all his store of learning may be destroyed, his very ideas wiped away as if they had never been, his beloved possessions rendered useless or disgusting, and he, who is styled the Lord of the creation, degraded even below the beasts. O, let us remember "in whose hand our breath is, and whose are all our ways!"

Now indeed might the taunting speech be taken up against the king of Babylon, "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations! For thou hast said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit."*

* Isa. xiv. 12--15.

Shall we not fear for ourselves, and bow before God? O tremble, you sinners, who are at ease! However gay and prosperous you may be; to-morrow, to-day you may be reduced as low as Nebuchadnezzar. The Lord God, indeed, does not always execute judgment in so remarkable a manner. But will you presume upon his patience? Even though you should be suffered to go down to your grave in peace, you will not therefore escape. Has He no terrors in reserve, beyond the present life? O, sirs, a more tremendous sentence than what Nebuchadnezzar experienced awaits the impenitent in a future world. Soon will it be said, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels."*

Years before But we leave not the Chaldean monarch Christ, 563, in his wretched state of exile and ferocity. Behold, then, in this instance, the goodness, as well as the severity, of God! After seven years, for so it had been foretold, he recovered the full exercise of his reason, the possession of his government, and all his former magnificence. But, though this alteration was astonishing, one still more remarkable took place; the moral character of the man appeared to be changed. Upon the restoration of his understanding, he manifested very different dispositions of mind. He had learned, in a painful manner, the universal and uncontrollable sovereignty of Jehovah; and therefore he bowed before Him with strong marks of humiliation

* Matt. xxv. 41.

and obedience. He blessed, and praised, and honoured the most High, and confessed the design and the justice of his late awful visitation. For the conviction of others, too, he published his case to the whole world (the narration being delivered in his own words), and solemnly called upon all persons to admire, reverence, and serve the true God, whose dominion reaches throughout all ages, and extends to every inhabitant both of heaven and earth.

The history before us is full of wonders : we do not attempt to solve the difficulties which might be raised concerning it. We presume not to decide upon the real character and final state of Nebuchadnezzar. Doubtless, a powerful influence had been exerted in subduing the proud and rebellious opposition of his heart against God : but it may be questioned whether the change was universal and abiding. At least we know that many a haughty sinner has been so intimidated or softened by extreme suffering, as to make public confessions of his guilt, and to recommend the religion he had before persecuted, who yet never became a true convert. Let us suspect and try ourselves : and, while we allow that it is not enough to reform the life from gross iniquities, let us pray that we may possess " the power of godliness."

But, though caution be necessary, we are inclined to admit the king of Babylon into the list of true penitents. We dare not deny the mercy of God to the most presumptuous offenders ; and in the present instance, it must be acknowledged, there were many very favourable appearances, and such effects as are

usually thought the genuine fruits of repentance. On this charitable supposition, we are constrained to cry out, "Is not this a brand plucked out of the fire?" We admire and praise the riches of that grace, which can subdue and pardon so obdurate a sinner. We adore the condescension of that glorious Personage, who is "the Repairer of the breach," and has opened, for those who have been most abandoned, a way of access to God through his own blood. Let those "who have received the atonement" stand forward, as Nebuchadnezzar, to confess their obligations, and invite others to join with them in giving all blessing and honour unto Him who has done so great things for them! They can tell from what a depth of guilt and misery He has redeemed them, and they will number amongst their most valuable mercies those painful dispensations which tended to abase their pride, and to produce in them "the obedience of faith."

But is there no cause of terror to the careless? Or, because the grace of God is so free and extensive, do all therefore obtain forgiveness? Far otherwise. Many, alas! die, as they live, in utter hardness and impenitence of heart; and in all such cases the Gospel itself forbids us to hope. O, submit to your rightful Lord! Take hold of his covenant, and so make peace with Him. For "wo is unto Him who striveth with his Maker!"

SHADRACH, MESHACH,
AND
ABED-NEGO.

CHAP. XVI.

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, descendants of David—their situation at Babylon—promoted—refused to worship Nebuchadnezzar's idol—accused before him—cast into the furnace of fire—delivered, and restored to honour.

WE have seen the whole nation of the Jews reduced to a state of extreme distress, a large part of them carried captives to a distant land, deprived of their government and religion, subjected to an idolatrous people, and treated with the utmost contempt and cruelty. This was an awful dispensation; and yet some important, wise, and gracious purposes, were effected by it. It was intended as a severe chastisement to them for their wickedness, and as the means of purging them from those profane and Pagan practices which obtained among them. By their dispersion it was also designed to diffuse among the Gentiles the knowledge of divine revelation (for they took their Scriptures with them to remote nations), and thus to prepare the way

for Messiah, the great Deliverer, by raising a general expectation of him through the world.*

It pleased God, therefore, for the support of his own cause, to preserve “a holy seed,” even at Babylon, and to make them conspicuous in the midst of their enemies. Many, of the most excellent character, were there called forth to public view: and they gave an open and bold attestation of the true religion. Their situation, indeed, was in many respects unfavourable to the advancement or the profession of piety, surrounded as they were with opposers and persecutors. But the God whom they served upheld and strengthened them, and by them wrought wonders among the Heathen, for his own name’s sake. We have now before us the history of three persons of this very description, signally honoured of God for their adherence to Him; and their case will confirm our observations.

Years before It should seem that they were of the seed-Christ, 607. royal, the descendants of David, and were carried into captivity at an early age.† When the proud conqueror, Nebuchadnezzar, had reduced them to the infamous situation of eunuchs (agreeably to the divine denunciation for the iniquity of their fathers), these young men, together with Daniel, were chosen from the rest, as remarkable for their beautiful form, and quick understanding, that they might attend upon the king. They were the intimate friends and companions of Daniel; and, being attached to him as well as to each other by the firmest principles of religion,

* Edward’s Hist. of Redemp. Per. 1. part 6. † Dan. i. 3, &c.

they acted in concert together, and thus proved a mutual support and comfort. With him they abstained from their pleasant food, out of a pure conscientious motive, that they might not be defiled with the customs of the Heathen; and God gave them such a degree of wisdom, that they far excelled the wisest of the Chaldean Magi.—When they, and all the astrologers, were threatened with death by the haughty tyrant, because they could not declare the dream which he had forgotten, upon their joining in fervent prayer with Daniel, the secret was revealed, and, through Daniel's intercession, they were preferred to an honourable post in the government of Babylon.*

The account of their lives is short: only one other transaction, in which they are concerned, is recorded; but this is accompanied with circumstances so remarkable and affecting, and is related with such a beautiful simplicity, that it must strike the attention of every reader. We shall find it replete with serious and important instruction: for we may learn from it to glorify God in tribulation, and through faith in him to meet the most enraged enemies with composure and confidence, desiring only that He may be magnified in us, whether by life or by death.†

We do not wonder that they became the objects of envy and persecution, as well for their high dignity, to which as foreigners and captives they could have no pretensions, as for their public profession of a strange religion, and their very exemplary conduct. The hatred

* Dan. ii. 17, &c.

† Phil. i. 20.

and opposition of the great brought them into the most perilous and distressful situation : yet, if we take a view of their spirit and behaviour at that season, we cannot but be filled with a holy admiration and delight. The sincerity and strength of their principles were put to a severe trial. For, when Nebuchadnezzar had erected an immense idol, an image of gold to which he commanded all the chief persons in his kingdom to bow down, on pain of a tremendous and immediate death, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, refused to comply.* All others fell down and worshipped : but these men feared the God of heaven, and would acknowledge no deity besides. They were instantly accused and arraigned before the prince, as guilty of extreme ingratitude, contempt, and rebellion against him ; and the threatened punishment was called for, that they should be cast into the burning fiery furnace.

We do not hear that any charge was preferred against Daniel on that occasion ; yet it cannot be supposed that he obeyed the injunction, or disowned his religion. He might be absent on business of the state : or his enemies might be afraid to make their first attack upon him, as he possessed such extensive power and influence ; and they might expect the more easily to accomplish his overthrow, after they had succeeded against his associates.

The three pious Jews, therefore, stood before the enraged monarch to answer for their conduct, which he considered as highly insulting to himself. He con-

* Dan. iii. 1, &c.

descended, however, to give them another trial, and yet expressed his firm determination, that, in case of their continued disobedience, they should feel his severest vengeance, and defied even the Almighty God to rescue them out of his hands.

Their situation was most difficult. For how many reasons, besides a regard to their own emolument and the love of life, might induce them to comply with the king's demands! We apprehend that the temporizing worldlings of the present day would have been at no loss to furnish arguments for their ready submission. It might be pleaded that the sinfulness of the action enjoined was dubious, as they were not required to renounce their religion, or to profess any belief in the idol, but only to bow down amidst an immense multitude, which might be done with a secret reserve of the mind. Or, if criminal, it would be only a single offence, for which they might repent, and be forgiven. It might also be suggested, that being captives, they were not at their own disposal, and that, as they were subjected to the will of a tyrant, he and not they must answer for the guilt. Besides, their disobedience to the edict might be construed as base ingratitude to their benefactor, who had raised them to a state of high dignity. And why should they be so precise and singular, as obstinately to refuse what others acceded to without scruple, and what even many of their countrymen had practised in Judea? Perhaps, too, some would have thought it allowable and expedient to give way in this instance, since they might thereby have promoted the good of the church, as well

as their own safety, while they retained a situation of such extensive usefulness. We observe, at least, how easy it is to multiply arguments in justification of a conformity to the world; and if we begin to hesitate, or consult with flesh and blood, in a time of temptation, we shall probably resolve to comply.

Did Shadrach, then, and his companions, stagger in their minds, or even feel a difficulty to determine on their conduct? No: every consideration was banished but the regard which they owed to God. Without attending to their own interest or preservation, without endeavouring by any subtleties to evade or explain away the guilt of sinful concessions, without seeking to avert the king's displeasure by mean artifices or persuasions, they declared their unalterable purpose to hazard every consequence in a steadfast adherence to the worship of Jehovah. They replied, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up."—We are struck with admiration at their composure of mind.* They discovered no dread of

* Never was the observation of the Poet better exemplified than in the instance before us:—

"Justum, ac tenacem propositi virum,
Non civium ardor prava jubentium,
Non vultus instantis tyranni,
Mente quatit solida."—HORACE.

the threatening tyrant ; they shuddered not at death in its most frightful forms. They said, “ we are not careful to answer thee :” we feel no terror, nor are we shaken in our principles by thy severest menaces. This indeed is sufficiently accounted for by the strength of their faith in God. They expressed the firmest dependence on Him for support and deliverance, as his servants maintaining his cause ; they confided in his truth and mercy towards them, and on that ground expected that He would not permit them to be confounded. “ If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king.” Thus they gave a noble testimony of their supreme regard to the God of Israel, and of their willingness to endure every hardship for his sake. It is not certain that they had any intimations of God’s design to rescue them : they knew indeed what He could do, and what in other cases He had done ; but having found a reality and excellence in religion, worth suffering for, they resolved, with an astonishing firmness, not to shrink from it, whatever it might cost them : “ Be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.”

This is an illustrious example of that faith which “ endures as seeing Him who is invisible.”* Let us pause awhile, and indulge our meditations, that we may be suitably affected with the history. Does it not speak to us with an irresistible energy, and evince the necessity of being established in religious principles ?

* Heb. xi, 27,

Though we do not live at a Babylonian court, we are surrounded with those who are enemies to God. An image of gold may not be set up as the object of public worship; but something or other, that the world will offer, will soon put us to the trial, and determine whom we serve. Young people, especially, are exposed to various temptations, from which nothing can certainly secure them but the fear of God, and a steadfast belief of his truth. We wonder not, then, that the chief part of those in the present day are content to swim down the stream, and are carried away by the corrupt fashions of the age. For what should induce them to resist, to "come out, and be separate?" Their minds are not furnished with the knowledge of divine things; and, from the want of pious instructions, their consciences feel little or no sense of evil: and therefore they are left without any effectual restraint. What a lamentable prospect does this give us of the rising generation! We call upon you, parents, "Bring up your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." Fortify them against those assaults to which they must be exposed, and implant in them such principles as will make them "valiant for the truth."

The example we are contemplating will surely excite in us a holy fervour and courage for the defence of our religion. If, indeed, it be not worth contending for, it were absurd to incur reproach and opposition on its account: but if it be the most important concern, as it doubtless is, every other consideration should be sacrificed to it. Where, then, is your esteem for the Gospel of Christ? You know not its value, nor are

you attached to its interest, if you are easily led away by the enticements of an evil world. If you are afraid or ashamed to maintain the profession and the practice of it against the infidel and the sensualist, if you yield to their solicitations we cannot so properly say that you renounce your principles, as that you have no good principles at all. Perhaps those are less dangerous enemies to Christianity, who reject the whole, than those who in private pretend the highest regard for it, and dare not openly avow it. Talk not of the prudence or expedience of temporizing, as if you could increase your usefulness by an occasional compliance. According to your plan, "the noble army of martyrs" acted a foolish part, and it would have been better for the church if they had spared their blood. But, surely, God will be more honoured by your steadfast adherence to his cause than by your cowardly desertion of it. What though you are under obligations to those, who wish to gain you over to their notions or customs? Endeavour to convince them that you are not unmindful of their kindness, but that you owe more to God than to them. Appeal to the reason of those who would seduce you, "Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye."* Let no consequences terrify you. Is shame, poverty, imprisonment, or even "the burning fiery furnace," more to be dreaded than the frowns and fierce indignation of a just and omnipotent God? No: "Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do;

* Acts iv. 19.

but fear Him, who, after he hath killed, hath power to cast into hell.*

We might have thought that the bold confession of these pious Hebrews, and their readiness to suffer for the honour of Jehovah, would have changed the king's word, and reminded him of his former convictions.† But he was the more exasperated; and the Lord permitted his pride and rage to break forth with the utmost violence, on purpose to show how weak and contemptible this furious adversary was, and to display his own mighty power, which wrought effectually in supporting his oppressed servants. While Nebuchadnezzar, therefore, was transported to an inconceivable degree of madness, and the furnace was heated seven times more than usual, these holy men preserved their composure, nor once shrunk from their resolution. The flames, which were so fierce as instantly to consume their executioners, had no terror to them. They yielded their bodies to martyrdom, and, "for conscience towards God," went down undismayed into the midst of the fire.

A glorious company, in different ages of the church, have followed their example; nor has the Gospel had a stronger confirmation of its truth and importance than the patience, courage, and exultation, of those who have dared to die in its defence. The force of this argument has been felt; and therefore "the blood of the martyrs" has been called "the seed of the church," from which a large increase has been produced. To men of worldly views, indeed, those who suffer for

* Luke xii. 4, 5.

† Dan. ii. 47.

righteousness' sake appear to act most absurdly. And so they do, if this life be all. But if there be a heaven and a hell, their wisdom will soon be manifest, and their bitterest persecutors will be constrained to admire their conduct, and to say, "We fools accounted their life madness, and their end to be without honour: How are they numbered among the children of God, and their lot is among the saints!"*

A burning fiery furnace may seem terrible: and terrible indeed it is to those who have no God to support them in it. Are you not afraid, then, of "the devouring fire," of "everlasting burnings," and of "the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone?" Do they excite no dread? Or will you not inquire, How shall we escape? What will it avail you to enjoy the honours and pleasures of sin for a season, if you must soon lie down in torment and despair?

It is not probable that you will incur any heavy calamity by a faithful confession of Christ; for these are not times of violent persecution. But your sincerity will be brought to the test; and, if you are unwilling to suffer the least inconvenience for your religion, you are utterly unlike the examples before us. How would you have stood "the fiery trial" which they endured? Or how do you answer the description of a disciple of Christ, "denying himself, and taking up his cross daily?" But if you desire "to keep yourselves unspotted from the world."—to "follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth,"—the present history should increase your belief and hope, while you observe the

* Wisd. v. 4, 5.

gracious interposition of God for the deliverance of his servants.

Perhaps it should be considered as their greatest deliverance that they were not carried away with the stream of general corruption, and were strengthened to resist the king's commandment, and to continue "faithful unto death." But we are called to view a signal exhibition of the divine Providence in their preservation. The mighty men of Nebuchadnezzar's army were consumed at the entrance of the furnace; but the three Jews fell down unhurt, and in the midst of the flames were supported by that faith, which "quenched the violence of fire."* Not even a hair of their heads was singed; no smell of burning passed upon their garments. The bands, indeed, by which they were tied, were broken, for they walked loose in the fire; and there probably they enjoyed such heavenly consolations as they had never known before. Their omnipotent Redeemer favoured them with his own immediate presence; for a glorious Personage accompanied them, whose form resembled the Son of God. This effectually subdued the fury of the king; he saw it to his own utter astonishment, and instantly calling forth the persecuted saints from their prison, he restored them to honour, directed the attention of his subjects to their miraculous preservation, and enjoined that none should dare to speak against the God who had done such wonderful things.

We do not assert that any similar interposition is to be expected or desired.* But this stands as an eminent

* Heb, xi. 34.

proof of the faithfulness and tender compassion of God to his oppressed people in their deepest distresses. Never was there a more striking illustration, or exact completion of that promise, "When thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee."* And to us also the gracious declaration extends. To believers in every age and nation, Jehovah says, "I will be with thee,—I will deliver thee." Be confident of this, then, that he will extricate you out of all your difficulties: only submit the time and the means to His sovereign appointment. The intended help may be delayed for the exercise of your faith, and for a brighter display of the power, veracity, and loving-kindness of your God. Do not complain, or be discouraged, if you should suffer to the latest hour. He, in whom you trust, will plead your cause, and call you forth to far greater honour than Nebuchadnezzar did these pious Hebrews: He will place you at his own right hand for evermore. What a glorious company will there be, when all the ransomed of the Lord shall return to Zion! Then it will be said, "These are they who came out of great tribulation;"† and, if you would be numbered with them, like Moses you must "choose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season."‡

It is observable, that, however the situations and circumstances of men vary, the same temptations have been offered in different ages. The integrity of the ancient saints and of the first Christians was attacked

* Isa. xliii. 2. † Rev. vii. 14. ‡ Heb. xi. 25.

in a way similar to that by which we ourselves are tried. The language of the world has uniformly been, "Come with us : do as we do ; worship at our altars ; and conform to our customs." You, who follow the Lord Christ, must be prepared to answer. To be consistent with your own principles, since you profess to "renounce the pomps and vanities of this wicked world," you must hazard every consequence, and be willing to suffer martyrdom itself. And let even your enemies declare whether it is not a more honourable part to stand fast, through a firm reliance upon God, in defiance of death, than to desert his service, as if you had found him a hard Master.

Perhaps, when you have cheerfully given up all things for God, He may restore them to you, as He did to these ancient worthies. Be that, however, as it may, you shall receive an hundred-fold, in the world to come, for all that you may now be deprived of. Then pray to God, that "in all your sufferings here upon earth, for the testimony of His truth, you may steadfastly look up to Heaven, and by faith behold the glory that shall be revealed." Amen.*

* Collect for St. Stephen's Day.

B E L S H A Z Z A R.

CHAP. XVII.

Belshazzar, grandson of Nebuchadnezzar, besieged by Cyrus—held an intemperate feast—introduced the holy vessels, in profane contempt of Jehovah—suddenly confounded by a hand-writing—reproved by Daniel—himself slain that night, and Babylon taken by the Medes and Persians.

THE great Almighty Governor of the world is but little known or acknowledged amongst us. “ Though He be not far from every one of us,”* and we are constrained to feel our dependence upon Him for every breath we draw, yet who inquires “ Where is God my Maker ?”† Is it because He is invisible that we dare to neglect, dishonour, and provoke Him ? Do we not perceive his footsteps on every side ? Has not he frequently made bare his holy arm, and displayed the glory of his majesty, and the terrors of his justice, by the most awful judgments ? Yes ; He hath at different times compelled the most obdurate sinners, by some tremendous events or appearances, to confess and dread his power. When “ the voice of his thunder is in the heaven, when the lightnings lighten the world, when the earth itself trembles and shakes,”‡ who does not feel a sense of God upon his soul ? The effect, indeed, is often momentary. If a calm succeed

* Acts xvii. 27. † Job xxxv. 10. ‡ Psal. lxxvii. 18.

the tempest, commonly the perturbation of the mind subsides, and a careless indifference, a profane security, takes place.

How little are men affected with the transactions of past ages, or with the denunciations of "the wrath to come!" Should one be sent unto us from the dead, from the abodes of darkness and despair, to attest and describe the torments prepared for the ungodly, a terrible alarm might be excited among us; yet even this would not be sufficient to produce any genuine humiliation and repentance, as our Lord has taught us:* and probably, if it were not repeated, in the next generation it would be despised and laughed at, if not denied and disbelieved, as an idle tale, or the foolish reverie of a disordered imagination.

The history before us will illustrate and confirm this observation. Is it possible, we are ready to ask, that the miracles which Nebuchadnezzar had beheld should ever be forgotten in the court of Babylon? Let matter of fact decide. Whatever might be the effect upon that monarch, it does not appear that any strong impression was made upon others, at least not for any continuance, even in his own family. Belshazzar, his grandson, in the Scriptures called his son (which expression implies only an immediate descendant), instead of learning righteousness from the divine judgments, seemed to advance to a higher pitch of profaneness than Nebuchadnezzar himself; and being suddenly cut down in his iniquity, he has exhibited in his destruction the tremendous justice of our God.

* Luke xvi. 31.

Perhaps some persons may cast their eyes upon these pages, who, according to their measure and ability, resemble Belshazzar in a daring contempt of God. O that we could prevail upon them to attend to this example, not in the way of reading a strange story to gratify their curiosity, but with the view of receiving instruction of a most interesting nature! Here they may see the odiousness of their own character and conduct, and the danger to which they are exposed. The case is recorded as a solemn warning to all succeeding ages, to restrain presumptuous transgressors, and convince them that there is a God in heaven, who judgeth the earth. May he display his power among ourselves, not to destroy but to save sinners! May they tremble, like Belshazzar, when they perceive the sentence of condemnation issued out against them; and may they feel, what we fear he did not, that "godly sorrow, which worketh repentance to salvation!"

Years before The only account given of him in the Christ, 538. Scriptures represents him as a bold offender, in a shameless scene of lewdness, intemperance, and blasphemy.* If we advert to the situation of his affairs at that time, his conduct will appear the more atrocious. He had been already overcome in a set battle by Cyrus, the general and prince of the Medes and Persians, and for two years had been closely besieged in his city.† But, instead of consulting for the safety of his government, he was addicted to sensual pleasures. Babylon, indeed, had nothing to dread from the most formidable attack, defended as it was by its

* Dan. v. 1, &c. † Frid. Connect. Part i. Book 2.

walls, bulwarks, gates of brass, and especially by the river Euphrates, and supplied with provisions for twenty years. Belshazzar, therefore, confident of his own invincible strength, laughed at the attempt of reducing his capital. Thus he trusted to an arm of flesh, and forgot what Nebuchadnezzar had learnt in such a painful manner, "that the most high God ruleth in the kingdom of men, and that he appointeth over it whomsoever He will." He would not be restrained in his career by the national distress ; and at last he filled the measure of his iniquity.

A night was set apart for revelling, drunkenness, and all kinds of licentious mirth, with his wives, concubines, and a thousand of his nobles. To this excess was added a high degree of profaneness, and an avowed contempt of Jehovah. The holy vessels, which Nebuchadnezzar had brought from the temple of Jerusalem, were introduced at this riotous banquet, perhaps to raise an impious laugh against the captive Jews, and the God they worshipped. As the seventy years of their servitude were then drawing to a conclusion, they might probably have intimated an expectation of returning to their own land, and taking these sacred utensils with them. In derision both of them and their religious services, the vessels were sent for, and, we presume, many blasphemous speeches uttered upon the occasion. For, while the guests drank their wine out of those very cups and bowls, which had been dedicated to Jehovah, they seemed to bid defiance to Him, by praising their own senseless idols.

Is there nothing of a similar spirit and conduct amongst ourselves? Are there no advocates for lewdness and intemperance? Are there none who "run to the same excess of riot," and boast that they are under no control, as if they had a right to gratify their passions? Are there not those, too, who will not be restrained from their revellings by difficulties or distresses in their families or their business; or who arrogantly suppose that nothing shall prevent or embitter their sensual enjoyments? They say in their hearts, "Soul, take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry;" and, "I shall have peace, though I walk in the imagination of mine heart, to add drunkenness to thirst." May we not ask, then, where is the difference between you and Belshazzar, except it be that you have not the opportunity of sinning in so extensive a manner as the king of Babylon?

Does it not also make a part of your entertainment to scoff at religion, and those who profess it? O, beware what you do! You may excite a foolish laugh among your companions, by throwing out profane jests in contempt of divine things, while the cup of intemperance goes round; but such scoffs are serious matters, and most awful in their consequences. They hurt not those at whom they are levelled; but shortly they will be like poisoned arrows in your own breasts, and "drink up your spirit." For by such wanton mirth you blaspheme the God of heaven. He will take up the cause, and avenge the insult put upon his name.

Notwithstanding that ease and confidence, which some presumptuous offenders possess, they may possibly, the very next instant, be overwhelmed with terror. It is only for God to give them a true sight of their guilt, and to rouse their conscience to its proper office; and all their courage would immediately forsake them; their licentious songs would be changed for howlings of despair, and they would feel such inexpressible misery as would be an awful presage and anticipation of their final destruction. In the present example we observe that God has a secret and powerful access to the minds of the most obdurate sinners, and can soon turn "their laughter to mourning, and their joy to heaviness." We behold Belshazzar, in the midst of his jollity and mirth, arraigned, convicted, sentenced, and confounded. His insolence and profaneness were suddenly repressed; and he, who one moment seemed to challenge earth and heaven, the next was obliged to stand and tremble like a criminal at the bar of justice. He saw a hand put forth, and writing upon the wall of his palace; and, though he could not read the characters, "his countenance was changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his loins were loosed, and his knees smote one against another." He cried aloud for the Magi to come and explain the phenomenon; and, when he perceived that they were unable to give any interpretation, his horror increased, and his nobles were all astonished.

It may appear strange that he should be so terrified by certain unintelligible marks; for why might they not be supposed to foretel good success? The case was,

he had an accuser and a judge within ; “ his thoughts troubled him.” The immediate influence of God upon his mind excited this alarm : and thus, in an instant, He can arrest the most abandoned sinner, only by making “ his thoughts to trouble him.” Many are stopped in their mad career, not indeed by the same means as Belshazzar, but as evidently by the power of God as if his hand were seen imprinting their sentence on the wall. A great part of those, who are converted to God in righteousness, are affected in a similar way, when, by some awful event, a solemn word of admonition, or their own serious recollections, being awakened out of their stupor, they first perceive their wretched condition. “ Their thoughts trouble them,” at the remembrance of their offences, under a conviction of deserving eternal punishment, and from an apprehension of impending destruction : and then the very persons, who a little before, possibly, were blaspheming God, cry out, with unutterable anguish, “ Lord, what wilt thou have me to do ?” A change of this kind is matter of joy, as it suggests the hope of repentance and salvation. But the terror of which we speak is not in itself desirable, nor do all who feel it turn out real penitents. In some an absolute despair succeeds ; and they experience upon earth a measure of that torment which awaiteth them in the world to come. Could we follow them to that state, we should there also observe, that “ their thoughts trouble them,” and that they are constrained to gnash their teeth, through the inward horror of their minds ; for God will set all their sins in array before them. We cannot, indeed, form

any suitable conceptions of their misery : but the little we do know will justify our earnestness in warning men to " escape the damnation of hell."

The confusion of the king being published through the palace, the queen (probably his mother) entered the apartment ; and, by her advice, Daniel, the Prophet of Jehovah, was sent for. As the principal officer, he transacted the affairs of government ; yet it should seem that his company had not been much relished in Belshazzar's court ; for the prince addressed him as if he had been a stranger to his character. But we have often remarked that the presence and conversation of ministers and other holy persons, who were disliked and avoided in a time of ease and prosperity, have been eagerly desired in sickness and distress, Nor should they be unwilling to attend, and bear a faithful testimony, even in such afflictive cases. Daniel proceeded without hesitation to fix a charge of guilt upon the royal criminal, convicting him of pride, intemperance, and impiety, and representing his wickedness as highly aggravated by his contempt of the judgments inflicted on his grandfather Nebuchadnezzar. He then read and interpreted the awful sentence written on the wall, MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN, which declared that the Almighty Sovereign was bringing the kingdom of Babylon to a conclusion ; that He had weighed the haughty monarch in the balances, and had found him wanting ; and therefore that his dominion was about to be transferred to the Medes and Persians.

Where is the sinner whose conscience could remain calm and serene under such a reproof as this? Be per-

sueded to consider your own state and character. What has been your manner of life? and what is your hope towards God? Have you not "walked according to the course of this world, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind?" Perhaps you have also been, like Belshazzar, insensible of all the judgments which God has inflicted. You have seen one bold offender or another destroyed by the divine visitation, and yet have never been truly alarmed for yourselves. You may have heard of those, even among your own families, who have been suddenly checked in their career of sin, and turned to God, through some heavy calamity; and yet you harden your hearts, and refuse to submit. "The God, in whose hand your breath is, and whose are all your ways, have you not glorified."

Do you presume, that, as Belshazzar's was a singular case, and as no such reproof is addressed unto you, there is no need for you to be terrified? Surely you forget, that in the book of God there is a hand-writing sent from Him, which expressly condemns you. It declares that "you are weighed in the balances, and are found wanting;"—wanting in obedience to every command; wanting in every relation wherein you have stood towards God and man; wanting, according to the demands of the Gospel, as well as of the law. And is there no sentence denounced against you? If you will not read for yourselves, be prevailed on to attend to those who will explain it to you. Your days are numbered, and your time of grace is drawing to a conclusion. God hath made trial of you, and you are proved defective throughout; and soon shall your

beloved possessions be taken from you, and bestowed upon another. What then remains ? or what awaits you beyond the grave ? When you appear before God in judgment, what can you expect from Him but indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish ? You will there find that the divine threatenings are not, as you now pretend, mere idle bugbears, which terrify only weak minds, but that they will be executed in full weight and measure.

Belshazzar stands as a witness of the faithfulness of God in bringing his menaces to effect. The boldness and security of sinners will not screen them, but may rather be considered as an awful presage of their approaching ruin. "For when they shall say, Peace and safety ; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child ; and they shall not escape."* This was remarkably fulfilled in the present instance. Immediately after Daniel's solemn declarations, in that very night when the riotous feast was kept, the enemies, who were besieging the city, took the opportunity, and by a very singular stratagem, having turned the course of the river, rushed in through the channel. The gates being carelessly (or shall we not say, providentially ?) left open, through the intemperance that prevailed in the town, they met with no obstruction. They entered the palace, where the astonished king and his nobles were instantly put to the sword ; and thus the Medes and Persians became possessors of that extensive dominion.† With Belshazzar the power and pride of Babylon perished together ;

* 1 Thess. v. 3.

† Xenoph. Cyrop. Lib. vii.

and all its boasted magnificence was soon after so entirely destroyed, that the very traces of it cannot be now found.

Here we behold the wisdom as well as the justice of God. All this had been repeatedly and circumstantially foretold by the Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Daniel. The very people who should accomplish this event were pointed out at the time, when the whole appeared in the highest degree improbable ;—Cyrus, the general, was specified by name, nearly two hundred years before ;—the very method of taking the city, by turning the waters of the great river into different streams, and thus drying up its channel, was described ;—and it was further predicted that it should be done suddenly, by night, at a season of great dissipation, while the king and his mighty men were engaged in a drunken carousal.* Respecting the fall of Babylon, therefore, we are constrained to say, “This hath God done ; for we perceive it was His work.” He beholds at one view whatever shall come to pass from age to age : and “His counsels of old are faithfulness and truth.” This destruction He appointed, as a punishment to the oppressors of his people, for their pride, cruelty, love of pleasures, and idolatry. It was “the vengeance of the Lord ;—the vengeance of His temper.”† O, let his enemies fear before Him, and his servants rejoice in the certainty of his promises !

* Isa. xiii. 6—22. xxi. 2—10. xlv. 1—3. xlvii. 1, &c. Jer. 1. 1, &c. li. 1, &c. Prid. Connect. Part i. Book 2. Bishop Lowth on Isa. xiii. xxi. and xlv.

† Jer. li. 11.

Where, then, is the pomp of this haughty monarch? —“ cast out of his grave like an abominable branch, and as the raiment of those that are slain, thrust through with a sword, that go down to the stones of the pit; as a carcase trodden under feet.”*—Here we pause, and follow Belshazzar no further. We have seen him cut off in his iniquity by the immediate judgment of God: and is there nothing in this history which excites an alarm? Is there not a voice, which proclaims aloud, “ Be ye also ready:”—and “ Take heed to yourselves, lest at any time your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and so that day come upon you unwares?”† You have known similar examples, in your own days, of those who have been suddenly destroyed in their intemperance, their blasphemy, and their uncleanness; and their destruction displays the hand of God as evidently as Belshazzar’s did. What effect have these things upon you? Is it no matter of dread to be called away in such a state? thus to be hurried from the noise of revelling and profaneness to the tribunal of a righteous God? If, indeed, there was no eternity, no judgment to come, there would be no great cause to tremble; but, O impenitent sinners, a far more tremendous sentence than that of Belshazzar hangs over your heads. Your friends and ministers, therefore, who love you, may well be pained for you, and must faithfully admonish you, whether you will hear, or whether you will forbear, that the time of final retribution is nigh, the day of the Lord’s vengeance, when

* Isa. xiv. 19.

† Luke xii. 40. xxi. 34.

his wrath shall smoke against every one who dies in his iniquity. O turn to God, and do works meet for repentance !

If the solemn warning has produced its proper influence, and you have found mercy with God through his covenant, how inexpressible are your obligations to Him ! You would have perished, even as others ; but He has had compassion upon you, “ for his own name’s sake,” and with a mighty hand has redeemed you to himself, that you may be a people for his praise. O tell of his loving-kindness, and let your whole conduct declare the sincerity and the warmth of your gratitude to Him !

Nay, if you are only just roused to a really spiritual concern, and you begin to tremble for your danger, we would suggest matter of encouragement and comfort to you. Your very fears may be salutary, a token that God is calling you to repentance. Only be willing to apply the remedy which the Gospel prescribes. Behold the Saviour, who hath “ made reconciliation for iniquity,” and “ redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us.”* Jesus hath “ blotted out THE HAND-WRITING that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross.”† Through Him, therefore, you have a full discharge. O, believe, and be saved : rejoice, and give thanks, for the glorious hope, which is set before you through Jesus Christ !

* Dan. ix. 24. Gal. iii. 13.

† Col. ii. 14.

DANIEL.

CHAP. XVIII.

Daniel, his situation as a Jewish prisoner at Babylon—eminent for wisdom—interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's vision—promoted—maintained his integrity—not accused, like his three friends—explained the king's dream—reproved Belshazzar—prime minister under Darius—hated for his piety—worshipped God, contrary to the king's edict—cast into the lions' den—rescued, and restored to honour—fasted and prayed—received singular revelations—probably obtained the release of the Jews—died in Chaldea.

“**P**URE and undefiled religion” is not confined to men of any one rank or situation in life. Some places, indeed, seem like an unfavourable soil for the growth of this noble plant; yet, notwithstanding difficulties, it has been known to flourish in all. The grace of God is sufficient to preserve us, let our circumstances be whatever they may; and, without such assistance, we are no where secure.

“Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called;”* but we can refer to some persons of this description, in almost every age, who have been eminently pious, and whom God raised up for peculiar services to his church. Their

* 1 Cor. i. 26.

excellence stands confessed by all ; for their examples shine with a degree of lustre superior to others, in proportion to their elevation. The view of such a character, though far advanced above us, may tend to excite us to greater animation and diligence in the work of the Lord. The present history will exhibit one thus highly distinguished by rank and goodness. Let us acknowledge our own cowardice, coldness, and inactivity ; let us learn to exert our utmost ability for the honour of our God and Saviour, and at the same time to walk unblameably “in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation ;”—while we contemplate and admire the abundant grace which rested upon DANIEL. May we possess a measure of his ardour in prayer, his assurance of faith, his firmness and purity of conduct, that we also may “shine as lights in the world !”

Daniel was among the few faithful witnesses who were raised up for the support of true religion during the captivity of the Jews in Chaldea. He was a descendant of David, and therefore the relation, as well as intimate associate, of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego.

Like them he was taken at an early age as a prisoner of war to Babylon, where he very soon became eminent for his wisdom and piety.* Ezekiel, who lived and prophesied at the same period, and in the same circumstances, though probably much older, spake of him with the highest commendations. When reproving the king of Tyre for a conceit of his own understanding, he said, “Thou art wiser than Da-

* Dan. i. 1, &c.

niel.”* He has also set him on a level with Noah and Job, as one of those who had the greatest interest in heaven, whose prayers were most effectual.†

Daniel, who was distinguished betimes, continued to maintain an honourable character through the several reigns of Nebuchadnezzar, Esarhaddon, Belshazzar, Darius, and Cyrus. Some remarkable events were accomplished in his time ; for he saw the awful distresses of his conquered and enslaved countrymen ; and, after dwelling with them at Babylon, during the seventy years of their captivity, he beheld their restoration, which had been so frequently predicted.

Years before Christ, 607. He was chosen, among other children “ in whom was no blemish,” that, after a proper degree of preparation, he might wait upon the king. In such a situation, surrounded with idolaters, he had every temptation to forget and renounce the religion of his fathers ; but even there his conscientious regard to it very soon appeared. With his three pious companions, he refused to partake of the provisions appointed him from the royal table, because he would not conform to the sensuality or the superstition of the Heathens, and therefore requested that he might be supported only with pulse and water. In the meantime he carefully attended to the studies which were enjoined, as a qualification for future usefulness. While he thus acted upon right principles, though his scruples might seem to expose him to heavy censures, he doubted not a happy issue. Nor was he disappointed ; “ God brought him into favour” with

* Ezek. xxviii. 3.

† xiv. 14.

his tutor; and, though he lived abstemiously, he enjoyed more vigorous health than those who had the richest food. The Lord also gave him such a portion of wisdom as far exceeded that of the most eminent persons in Chaldea, and excited the astonishment of the king.

It is pleasing to observe this tenderness of conscience, this abhorrence of evil, and firm attachment to true religion, in young people. How rare are such examples! What, in general, do we see at that age, but ignorance, thoughtlessness, love of pleasure, and intemperance? But is it not your concern, as much as it was Daniel's, to "remember your Creator in the days of your youth?" Do you, then, refuse to conform to those customs and maxims of the world which you know or suspect to be wrong? Are you not, rather, eagerly desirous of every sensual indulgence, and ready to yield to every temptation? Is this the conduct you can justify? Or is it right to sacrifice every good principle to a weak and foolish compliance with your company? Would you plead, as some do, that your time of life is the proper season for gaiety and the gratification of your appetite, and that it will be soon enough to attend to that gloomy thing Religion, when the strength and importunity of your passions are abated? What an avowed contempt of God, to call his service gloom and melancholy, as if He were a hard Master, and unworthy of the vigorous exertions of your best days! Or how can you imagine that He will accept you, when you renounce your sins, not of choice, but only because you can follow them no longer?

You are deterred from a conscientious regard to your duty, through the fear of difficulties. But these are either created or increased by your own unbelief; for, in general, those suffer least, who are most firm in their obedience to God. If you be attentive to your proper work, you will receive all needful assistance and support: perhaps God will give you favour with your enemies, as he did Daniel.

An incident soon occurred, which proved the faith of Daniel, and paved the way for his advancement. The king Nebuchadnezzar being perplexed by a singular dream, the particulars of which he could not even recollect, commanded all his wise men to be destroyed, because they could not declare or interpret it.* Daniel must have perished among the rest, had not the pious youth engaged his three companions to join with him in earnest prayer that the secret might be revealed. Accordingly, in answer to their petitions, Daniel obtained the desired information, and with warmest gratitude ascribed the glory to the God of heaven. He related with an astonishing exactness the various parts and circumstances of the vision, and gave a minute explanation of each. With great courage and fidelity he then called upon the proud monarch to adore the omniscience and sovereignty of Jehovah, from whom he had derived all his dominion, and who had condescended to make known to him some important events to come. Daniel was immediately acknowledged as a Prophet of the only true God, and raised to a state of high dignity: from that time he presided

* Dan. ii. 1, &c.

as "ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and sat in the gate of the king." So large a recompense did his piety receive!

Power, riches, and honours, were heaped upon the Jewish captive; but was this a situation to be envied? Or did he maintain his integrity amidst the splendours of a Babylonian court? We have heard of so many instances in which prosperity has been fatal to the souls of men, that we wonder to see any, who are rising in the world, continue to possess the life and vigour of religion. God and his cause are forgotten and despised, in order to obtain or preserve the smiles of a corrupt and wicked generation. "Man, that is in honour, and understandeth not, is like the beasts that perish."* "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!"† Such being the snares of greatness, it is highly necessary to warn those of their danger, who have the prospect of preferment. Beware lest you give up your principles through fear or shame. Is this a needless caution? Have not many, who in affliction and distress discovered the fairest appearances of real godliness, in ease and prosperity renounced their seriousness, and violated their most solemn vows, content to leave the duties of devotion to those who cannot enjoy life? "In all time of our wealth, good Lord deliver us!"

Are we then, it is asked, to reject the offers of advancement, or to resign those benefits and possessions which are put into our hands? This we did not assert. Religion requires not a total retirement from the

* Psal. xlix. 20.

† Mark x. 23.

world, or a morose refusal of its comforts. We entreat you only to be faithful to God according to your place and abilities ; and then, we allow the more exalted your rank, the more enlarged will your usefulness be.

Such was the bright pattern before us. His highest elevation abated not his pious fervour, but rather rendered it more conspicuous. He forgot not his three beloved companions ; for at his request they were all promoted to honour. When called to interpret the dream which predicted the king's expulsion from his throne and from human society, though overwhelmed with astonishment and distress in the prospect of so tremendous a judgment, he dared not to conceal or to palliate the truth.* As the servant and minister of Jehovah, he warned the haughty tyrant of his guilt and danger, and, neither courting his favour, nor dreading his displeasure, exhorted him to immediate repentance. "Break off," said he, "thy sins by righteousness, and thine iniquities by shewing mercy to the poor ; if it may be a lengthening of thy tranquillity.—We fear that reproof or counsel like this is not common in a palace. Nay, in much lower situations, how few have the courage or firmness to admonish offenders, however urgent the case may be ! A contrary spirit too frequently prevails : men are flattered in their sins, their consciences lulled asleep, even while they are tottering on the brink of ruin : or, if any terrors are excited, pains are taken to quiet their

* Dan. iv 8, &c.

apprehensions, by foolishly suggesting that many others are in a still worse condition.

Daniel gave a similar, or rather a more evident, proof of his integrity and faithfulness in the service of his God, when required to read and interpret the hand-writing against Belshazzar.* With the utmost boldness and intrepidity he arraigned the king as a guilty criminal, convicted him of an avowed and insolent contempt of God, and then in the name of Jehovah pronounced the sentence of his speedy destruction. The ministers of Christ are especially concerned to possess the like fidelity and zeal in the discharge of their office, without regard to their own private interest. It is incumbent on them "to commend themselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God," by a plain declaration of the truth, without reserve or partiality. They must assert and explain the awful doom of sinners; and, though they might wish to deliver a different message, they must denounce "the wrath of God, which cometh upon the children of disobedience." In this case their temporal emolument is not to be consulted, for they should remember to whom they must give account.

It deserves our notice, that Daniel paid a serious and uniform attention to religion, and preserved a holy, spiritual, and devout frame of mind, not only in an elevated rank, but also in a continual hurry of important business. The chief administration of the government was committed to him, for he acted during several successive reigns as the first minister of state.

* Dan. v. 13, &c.

Yet, notwithstanding that multiplicity of cares and engagements in which this post involved him, he maintained the strictest regard to the service of his God. After such an instance, will any persons mention their secular employments and avocations, the fatigues of trade, or concerns of a family, as an excuse for negligence or remissness in the profession or practice of piety? "We have no time" is the plea which many urge; but it is false. You are not diligent in turning to good account your scanty portions of leisure, and you willingly suffer your opportunities for spiritual edification to pass by you unimproved. No wonder, then, that we perceive an awful declension in your souls. Ah! how widely do you differ from the character of Daniel!

Years before Upon the death of Belshazzar an entire Christ, 538. revolution in the affairs of Babylon took place. The Medes and Persians then possessed the power under the government of Darius. Yet such was the reputation of Daniel for wisdom and integrity, that he obtained the office of highest dignity and trust, even in the new administration, and had the chief management of that widely-extended empire.* But wherever any eminent degree of true religion has appeared, though in the most exalted station, it has been the object of hatred and opposition. This is a strong indication of the depravity of our nature, that real holiness, when exemplified in life, excites disgust and persecution. Let those, therefore, "who will live godly in Christ Jesus," prepare for suffering, nor stagger in

* Dan. v. 1, &c.

their minds if their principles and practice expose them to the severest trials. Only let them be solicitous to maintain the honour of their profession, and "with well-doing put to silence the ignorance of foolish men." The case of Daniel will instruct and encourage them.

We do not read of any attempts or even objections against him till the reign of Darius; but a conspiracy was then formed to subvert and destroy him. The presidents and princes of the empire were offended with his exemplary piety, and fired with envious rage at his preferment. They endeavoured to bring some charge against him for mismanagement of the public affairs: but such were Daniel's probity, diligence, and attention, in the duties of his function, that their malignant designs on that ground, were frustrated. They determined therefore to make his religion the matter of their accusation. What an honourable testimony they bore in his favour! "We shall not find any occasion against this Daniel, except we find it against him concerning the law of his God."

This would be the strongest recommendation of the Gospel, if its advocates were, in like manner, so circumspect in their whole deportment, and so faithful in all their dealings, that their enemies should be obliged to confess there can be no just objections against them, except for their singularity in spiritual concerns. If you would follow Christ, or profess a regard for his truth, "walk in wisdom toward them that are without;" look well to every part of your behaviour in temporal affairs, and to all your engagements in the world. For many will narrowly scrutinize your conduct, and will

rejoice to "find occasion against you," in your shops, your families, your various departments and occupations. Should they discover any perfidiousness, neglect, or inconsistency, they will not fail to bring it into public view, and reproach your principles and your associates with it. For the honour of God, therefore, endeavour to disappoint them; so that, if they determine to accuse you, they may have no other cause than "the law of your God," and your steadfast adherence to him.

What, then, did Daniel's adversaries devise against him? They intended to deprive him of the free exercise of his religion, or to take him off by a violent death, if he should persevere in the worship of Jehovah. In an artful manner they persuaded the king to sign a decree, which flattered his vanity, that whosoever should prefer a petition to any god or man, except to the reigning monarch, within the space of thirty days, should be cast into a den of lions. An impious command indeed! obedience to which would have been sinful in the extreme. But could not the Prophet evade the danger, without openly disavowing his principles? There are those who assert we should always comply with the country and the company we are in; that by prudent management we may avoid persecution; that we need not acquaint others with our faith, and that it were better to keep it to ourselves. Thus many plead for a conformity to the world, and pacify their consciences, while they renounce every important position of the Gospel, in compliment to those who know not God, or to screen themselves from op-

position. Shall we allow, then, that real piety is of this pliant nature, that we may conceal it from all observation, and that it contains nothing worth contending for? This would be to set aside or explain away every doctrine and precept in the Bible. "But we have not so learned Christ." Our religion is the most valuable and necessary concern: if it be any thing at all, it is every thing; nor should we hesitate a moment to give up our interest, our liberty, or life itself, in order to maintain it.

Such was the firmness of Daniel. With all his wisdom, he understood not those maxims of prudence which are thought necessary now; and therefore he consulted not the fashion of the court, nor dreaded the wrath of the king, but cheerfully incurred the sentence of a violent death, "for conscience toward God." "He went into his house, and his windows being open in his chamber toward Jerusalem, he kneeled upon his knees three times a day, and prayed, and gave thanks before his God, as he did aforetime."

The devotions here spoken of were probably performed in the midst of his numerous household, as his family worship; for the time and place seem to have been well known, and his enemies, who were watching him for the purpose, found him in the very exercise, and heard him pray aloud. Great as he was, he officiated as the priest of his own house, and, amidst all the hurry of state affairs, kept himself at leisure thrice in each day to wait upon his God. Alas! how little is this duty practised, even where there are few worldly avocations, and no dangers to be apprehended!

It will be asked, perhaps, Why must he needs be so exact and singular? Could he not conform for a short season, abstain from his usual services for one month, retire to a distant part from the notice of the court, or conceal himself from a discovery at home? We are aware of that plausible ingenuity, which would make conscience bend to convenience. In any of these ways he would have been considered as renouncing his religion; the designs of his enemies would have been answered; and they might have reproached him with cowardice and hypocrisy. He did not therefore hesitate, but readily submitted to the sentence; and, upon the urgent demands of his accusers, though the king himself laboured to rescue him, he was actually cast into a den of ravenous lions.

There may be a dangerous and absurd scrupulosity, a perverse and obstinate contention for trifles, which must prejudice the cause of truth and piety. But beware how you extend the maxim of "becoming all things to all men." You may complain of some serious persons as too precise; but do not your compliances harden many sinners in their evil practices? Do you not teach them to despise your principles, through your timorous desertion of them? Do you not prefer your ease, your reputation, and emolument, to the honour and advancement of the Gospel? Surely, in the view of Daniel's courage and disinterested zeal, you must detest your own selfishness and cowardice. "Who art thou, that thou shouldst be afraid of a man that shall die?—and hast feared continually every day, because of the fury of the oppressor, as if he were ready

to destroy?—And where is the fury of the oppressor?—* Let us see “the end of the Lord” in the history before us. Daniel was protected, his enemies utterly confounded, and the name of the true God made known and glorified throughout that idolatrous country. The Prophet went down into the midst of those fierce and voracious animals; and what other consequence could have been expected, than that he would have been instantly devoured? But he went down in faith; and therefore the very lions forgot their savage nature: “no manner of hurt was found upon him, because he believed in his God.” What amazing deliverances have been obtained through a firm reliance upon the divine Power? It was this very principle, in the present instance, “which stopped the mouths of lions.”†

The king felt extreme distress for his persecuted servant, and, after a sleepless night, betook himself to the den early in the morning, to inquire the event. He found the venerable saint sitting in safety and composure among the furious beasts, asserting his integrity, and ascribing his preservation to the gracious interposition of Jehovah. Immediately he rescued him from his prison, restored him to his former dignity, condemned his accusers, with their families, who were all destroyed in the very way by which they had intended Daniel to have perished; and he issued out a decree, proclaiming to his subjects the glory of the God of heaven. May we learn from this eminent Prophet to sacrifice every worldly consideration to the de-

* Isa. li. 12, 13.

† Heb. xi. 33.

mands of conscience and the service of God! May we trust our all with Him, who has a sovereign right to employ us and dispose of us as He pleases; and, leaving other inferior concerns, may we desire chiefly, and above all, that “whether we live, we may live unto the Lord, and whether we die, we may die unto the Lord!”*

Do we admire the courage and steadfastness of Daniel? We must allow it to be the effect of that intimate communion with God, which he cultivated and enjoyed. He sought help from above, and obtained his request. We have remarked his attention to prayer in his youth; and we rejoice to observe, that even to old age this holy fervour continued with him. The last six chapters of the book which bears his name prove the warmth and the efficacy of his devotion. There we see him laying aside the ornaments which he usually wore as a courtier,—abstaining from his pleasant food,—humbling himself in sackcloth and ashes,—mourning before God, while he confessed his own sins, and the sins of his people,—pouring out his ardent supplications for their deliverance, and for the manifestation of the divine favour to them. Take especial notice of this part of the history, and learn whence you must derive that strength and comfort which will support you in your spiritual warfare. Is it not because you neglect retirement and the secret duties of religion, that your knowledge is so superficial, your affections so weak and wavering, that you seem to have no fixed principles, and are shaken by every tempta-

* Rom. xiv. 8.

tion? If you do not cultivate an intercourse with God, and implore direction and assistance from Him, it is no wonder that He leaves you to be baffled and overcome. But, were you constant and importunate in your applications to Him, you would receive such supplies of grace as would enable you to maintain and adorn your profession; you would enjoy the strong consolations of the Spirit, and approach nearer and nearer to the temple and felicity of the blessed in heaven.

Daniel obtained a large measure of divine communications;—and he appears more glorious as the Prophet of Jehovah, than as the prime minister of the Medes and Persians. He was admitted, as it were, to converse with angels, nay, with the Lord of angels, and was declared by Him to be “a man greatly beloved.” The most important events in futurity were revealed to him; and though his predictions contain “things hard to be understood,” which have furnished matter for learned criticism, as well as devout contemplation, yet some are so direct and express, that infidels have objected to them as if they must have been written after the accomplishment. In answer to his prayer, the various revolutions then about to take place in the empires of the world, the restoration of the Jews, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem, were made known to him. He received the clearest information concerning the person, the office, the work, and the benefits of the great Redeemer; the precise time of his appearance (after seventy weeks, or four hundred and ninety years); the nature and design of his sufferings; the troubles and persecutions of the church; and the final

consummation of all things, the resurrection of the dead, of some to everlasting life, and of others to everlasting shame and contempt.

He "had power with God and prevailed" in his secret devotions ; he was also highly useful in his public capacity. Probably through his influence with Cyrus the Jews were released from their captivity, and permitted to return to their own land ; though he himself maintained his post, and, it is believed, he died in Chaldea, being far advanced in years.*

What a value, what an excellency, is stamped upon this character ! You, who are gray headed, and bowed down with old age, come and see in Daniel what should be your perseverance, fervency, and zeal. Is it not your duty, as much as it was his, to "endure to the end?"—"to pray always, and not to faint?"—We say not that the like visions and revelations are to be looked for ; they are not wanted ; as the sacred canon of the Scripture, containing every thing needful for our information, is now closed, and nothing is to be added to it. But still, through the knowledge and the faith of Jesus, you may enjoy communion with God ; the light of His countenance ; the manifestation of his favour, which "is better than life ;" the consolations of the Holy Ghost ; the hope full of immortality ; the "peace, which passeth all understanding ;" the "joy, which is unspeakable and full of glory."

Are these privileges nothing ? or are they nothing to you ? Would you censure, as fancy and delusion, all experience or expectation of the comforts of reli-

* Prid. Connect. Part i. Book 2 and 3.

gion, and suppose that real devotion implies no more than external show and a lifeless formality? You are content, then, that all the happiness and power of godliness should be confined to the saints of old. But will you not wish to resemble them, and to partake of their blessedness, when God shall be glorified in them, and they in Him? Yet, unless you be made like them here, you will be for ever excluded from their society hereafter.

May the faith, the zeal, the holiness of Daniel, appear in all the followers, and especially the ministers of Christ, that they may, together with him, “ shine as the brightness of the firmament, and as the stars for ever and ever !” * Amen.

* Dan. xii. 3.

E Z R A.

CHAP. XIX.

Ezra wrote the account of the Jews' return, and their rebuilding of the temple—his learning and piety—his commission from Artaxerxes, and his journey from Babylon to Jerusalem—reformed abuses—engaged the people to enter into covenant with God—continued to teach, when superseded as a magistrate.

IN our contemplations on the ancient Scripture history, we have had frequent occasion to remark, that as men have always been inclined to oppose and corrupt the religion which God has revealed, so the establishment and revival of it have most evidently proceeded from Him. What thanks and praise do we owe to Him, who has graciously interposed, at various times, to plant or restore his truth! His sovereign providence directs and controls all persons and transactions, with a particular regard to the concerns of his church. The mightiest potentates, and most extensive empires, are exalted or brought down, in order to fulfil his purposes for this favoured society. Accordingly He says, "I will give men for thee, and people for thy life."*

Years before We are now arrived at a very important **Christ, 536.** period, when by a wonderful dispensation the Jews were released from their long captivity, con-

* Isa. xliii. 4.

ducted back again to their own land, and reinstated in many of their former privileges. As this was an event of the highest consequence to that nation, tending to preserve religion in the world, and preparing the way for the appearance of the great Deliverer, the Lord Jesus Christ,—as it is also a subject to which there are frequent references in the Old Testament,—it may be proper to take a distinct view of it, and endeavour to draw from it some useful instructions for ourselves.

Their re-establishment in Judea was not effected all at once, but at different times, and by different means. They had been carried away at various seasons; and they did not all return together. We speak now of the first recovery of their liberty, as described by Ezra, in the book which bears his name, and of which, no doubt, he was the author.

It had been predicted by many of their prophets that they should be brought back, and Babylon be reckoned with in her turn. Isaiah and Jeremiah, particularly, had declared this in the most express terms; the latter asserting that their banishment should continue, and their land lie desolate, for seventy years; and both of them foretelling that their release should be obtained in consequence of the destruction of Babylon by a people who seemed most unlikely to accomplish it, the Medes and Persians. Nay, the very person who should be the instrument of this great work, a Heathen prince and an idolater, was pointed out by name nearly two hundred years before.* According to these pre-

* Jer. xxix. 10. Isa. xlv. 28. xlv. 1—4.

dictions, Cyrus, the general of the Medes and Persians, surprised and conquered Babylon, and despoiled it of its glory. He succeeded Darius in the government, and, immediately upon his accession, published a proclamation, permitting the captive Jews to return to Jerusalem, and to rebuild their temple there.*

Known unto God are all his purposes from the beginning of the world ; and when events so far distant, so utterly beyond the reach of human conjecture and contrivance, are foretold in the most circumstantial manner, we cannot surely doubt that the information is received from Heaven. Here, then, we are furnished with an indubitable proof of the divine inspiration of the prophets. The predictions, also, clearly show that these revolutions took place, not by chance, but by the appointment and agency of God himself. He therefore claims the glory ; for He says, concerning this very subject, “ I will work, and who shall let it ? —For your sake I have sent to Babylon, and have brought down all their nobles. I am the Lord, the Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King.”† We stand in admiration of that sovereign influence which He exerts upon all his reasonable creatures at the same time that they fulfil their own wishes and desires. Daniel, probably, might have some ascendancy over Cyrus ; but we look higher than Daniel : “ the Lord stirred up the spirit” of this prince, in order to verify his own declarations. “ The king’s heart is in the

* Ezra i. 1, &c.

† Isa. xliii. 13—15.

hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: He turneth it whithersoever he will.”*

It is a delightful employment to contemplate the divine dispensations, and mark the tender and affectionate concern with which the Lord watches over his people, correcting them in measure, only for their benefit, and returning, as it were with great eagerness, to comfort them with the assurances of his love. “He is faithful that promised:” this is the ground of their security: “not one jot or tittle” of his word can fail. All the good things which he engaged to bestow upon his ancient church, “all are come to pass, and not one thing hath failed thereof.”† With this gracious God, “who keepeth covenant and mercy to a thousand generations,” we have to do. And shall we be afraid to trust Him, after all the proofs He has given us of his veracity, and “the immutability of his counsels?” As the captive Jews, encouraged by his declarations, were looking and praying for deliverance, let us also “wait for his salvation.”

When the prophets spake of redemption from Babylon, they were generally carried out to describe a much greater event, typified by it,—our release from spiritual bondage and eternal misery, redemption from sin, death, and hell. The Gospel asserts the completion of what they foretold, and proclaims this merciful release to poor enslaved sinners, effected for them through the incarnation, sacrifice, and intercession of the Lord Jesus Christ. “The good tidings of great

* Prov. xxi. 1. † Heb. x. 23. Matt. v. 18. Josh. xxiii. 14.

joy" are announced to us : let us cry out with gratitude and exultation, " Sing, O ye heavens ; for the Lord hath done it : shout, ye lower parts of the earth : break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein : for the Lord hath redeemed Jacob, and glorified himself in Israel."*

The decree of Cyrus, doubtless, gladdened the hearts of all the pious Jews ; but the bulk of the people did not claim the benefit. Many of them were comfortably settled in Chaldea, and therefore not desirous of a removal. The immense difficulties of the journey, and of forming a new settlement in their ancient country, must likewise have discouraged all those who had no spiritual views, no faith in God, or zeal for his glory. Only those took the advantage, whose minds God himself disposed to it. A divine influence was exerted, that the purpose of God might not be defeated. The case is exactly similar, wherever the gracious proclamation of the Gospel is carried. It is despised by many, because they feel not their need of those blessings which it proposes ; by others on account of the sacrifices which it requires to be made, the severe trials to be endured, and the arduous work to be performed. Objections of this kind would entirely frustrate the mediation of the Saviour, and none of the sons of men would accept the liberty which He bestows, if God himself did not put forth his power, and stir up the spirit of some to comply with the offer. O, how highly indebted are they who are thus in-

* Isa. xliv. 23.

clined to go forth from their natural state of bondage, and direct their faces toward Zion!

Though many, therefore, remained at Babylon, a numerous company, together with their principal elders, the priests and Levites, took their journey; and, under the protection of Heaven, they were safely conducted to Jerusalem. Soon after their arrival there, they set up the altar of the God of Israel, celebrated a holy festival, and presented various oblations to Him.* With much zeal and diligence they made preparations for the rebuilding of the temple, that their religious solemnities might be renewed. For this purpose Cyrus had restored to them their sacred vessels, which were carried away by Nebuchadnezzar, and large contributions had been raised both among the Persians and the Jews. In the second year the foundations of the Lord's house were laid, under the directions of Zerubbabel (a lineal descendant of David, and their legal prince), and Jeshua their high-priest, of the family of Aaron. When the builders entered upon the work, a divine ardour seemed to pervade the company. The priests and Levites, in their proper apparel, and with instruments of music, praised the Lord, and gave thanks to Him, "whose mercy endureth for ever;" the people also shouted with loud acclamations of gratitude and joy. The festivity, indeed, was in a measure interrupted by some of the old persons, who wept exceedingly when they recollected the splendour of their former temple, so much grander than this was likely to be. Their distress might have a bad effect, as weak-

* *Ezra* iii. 1, &c.

ening the hands of the Lord's servant's : and probably it arose from an unbelieving spirit. Alas ! it generally happens that the best designs are discouraged, and " the day of small things despised."*

Difficulties of another nature soon occurred. The undertaking, begun with alacrity and vigour, was impeded in its progress by various hindrances ; and for a long time it seemed as if the whole plan would be defeated.† Their near neighbours the Samaritans, whose worship was a sad corruption of the true religion, at first pretended friendship ; but, when all intercourse with them was declined, their enmity clearly appeared ; and, by false charges and invidious misrepresentations, they so far prevailed with the kings of Persia, as to stop the work during three or four successive reigns. At length the admonitions and exhortations of the Prophets Zechariah and Haggai roused the spirit of the Jews, especially of their leaders Zerubbabel and Jeshua, who had probably sunk into a very culpable remissness.‡ Being animated, then, by those pious teachers, they returned to the building with fresh ardour, and, upon being opposed as before, refused to desist. The ruling prince, Darius the second, was appealed to ; and in a singular manner he patronised their scheme, and promoted it by a very liberal contribution from his Years before own treasures.§ Thus, after many delays Christ, 515, they finished the sacred edifice, and then consecrated it to God, and kept the feast of dedication

* Zech. iv. 6—10.
‡ v. 1, &c.

† Ezra iv. 1, &c.
§ vi. 1, &c.

with great solemnity and joy.* Their faith and patience had long been tried ; but at last the Lord graciously interposed for them : for it was He, as they devoutly acknowledged, “ who turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God.”

Are we sensible of our obligations, in being freed from the difficulties with which they struggled ? Are we thankful for the house of God, and for the divine ordinances which are administered among us ? Will not these very privileges be the condemnation of many ? For are there not those who despise the church of God and refuse to join in any of our religious services ? Or, again, do not some contend earnestly for the external rites, and yet remain destitute of real devotion ? Where, then, is their boasted advantage ?

While our thoughts are engaged upon this event, we are directed by Zechariah to fix our regard on a nobler, a spiritual building. He sets before us the true Zerubbabel, the grand Architect of his church, the Lord Jesus Christ. “ Even He shall build the temple of the Lord ; and He shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule upon his throne ; and He shall be a priest upon his throne : and the counsel of peace shall be between them both.”† This structure rises under His care, even in our own day ; for he continues to lay one stone upon another. Will you lend your assistance

* The celebration of this feast, though not instituted by any divine appointment, was afterwards honoured by the presence of Christ himself. John x. 22.

† Zech. iv. 13.

towards furthering the great design? "They that are far off," says he, "shall come and build in the temple of the Lord."* But there are many adversaries: difficulties of various sorts prevent the progress and increase of this sacred edifice. Yet let not the severest opposition or the most malicious accusations discourage you: for the Lord presides over his own work: and in due season it will be completed to his abundant praise. "He shall bring forth the head-stone thereof with shoutings, crying, Grace, grace unto it!"†

Years before - For some time after the temple had been **Christ, 457.** finished, and the religious services restored at Jerusalem, matters still wore an unfavourable aspect. Probably the people possessed but little of the fervour of piety, and formed dangerous connexions with their idolatrous neighbours. But the Lord would not suffer his own purpose to be frustrated, nor his truth to perish; and therefore he raised up another instrument for the revival of his cause, EZRA, the scribe and the priest, a man most eminent for his learning, holiness, wisdom, and zeal.‡ A large part of the Jewish nation had not returned from their captivity; and Ezra himself still resided at Babylon, about eighty years from the first decree of Cyrus. But his mind was bent upon promoting the welfare of Israel; and accordingly he had applied himself to sacred studies, that he might be qualified to render them some essential service. "He had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord, and to do it, and to teach in Israel

* Zech. vi. 15.

† iv. 7.

‡ Ezra vii. 1, &c.

statutes and judgments." Artaxerxes, then upon the throne, being disposed to favour him, granted him a commission to the extent of his wishes. For he gave him full power to go to Jerusalem, with as many of his countrymen as were inclined to accompany him, to regulate the government and establish the divine worship : and he himself, together with all his counsellors, contributed most liberally to promote the design.

In this instance, as in many others, the prophecy was fulfilled, "the sons of strangers shall build up thy walls, and their kings shall minister unto thee."* The Lord God, in a sovereign manner, often impresses a fear of his majesty upon those who do not cordially submit to him, and influences them to maintain his cause, though they are not sincerely attached to it. "Why should there be wrath against us?" said Artaxerxes. He expected, probably, to expiate his own guilt, and purchase peace with Heaven, though he still remained an idolater. It is grievous that those who go so far will go no farther ; and that they should continue in ignorance of that very religion they undertake to vindicate. They are useful to the church of Christ, and yet never become members of it. We should be thankful to God, however, who disposes them to assist in his service. Accordingly Ezra devoutly acknowledged the divine interposition ; "Blessed be the Lord God of our fathers, which hath put such a thing as this in the king's heart !"

Thus commissioned, the man of God, with many others whom the Lord stirred up to accompany him,

* Isa. lx. 10.

prepared for the journey.* But the difficulties and dangers which awaited them by the way were enough to deter them. They had to travel to a very distant country, through a wild desert, exposed to hunger and thirst, the scorching heat of the sun, the rage of ravenous beasts, and the violent assaults of robbers, with little or no defence. Perhaps they felt some painful apprehensions; but they confided in the guidance and protection of Heaven: and Ezra would not ask for a guard, lest the king should reproach him, as inconsistent with his own principles, or distrustful of that God on whom he had professed the firmest dependence. Immediately, therefore, upon their departing from Babylon, he summoned his fellow-travellers, and joined with them in fasting and prayer, that they might commit themselves to the divine care, and implore all needful assistance; and then they proceeded in perfect safety to Jerusalem.

It is described by the prophets as a surprising dispensation of Providence that they should be led, supported, and preserved, throughout such a journey as this. The Lord himself is represented as going before them to conduct them, and as their reward also, to screen them from every attack; making bare his arm, in the sight of the nations, for the salvation of his people; opening a way in the wilderness, and rivers in the desert, to give drink to his people, his chosen; and engaging that no weapon formed against them should prosper.†

* *Ezra* viii. 1, &c.

† *Isa.* xliii. 19. lii. 10, 12. liv. 17.

These expressions, indeed, have a higher reference, and direct our attention to a dispensation infinitely more wonderful,—the deliverance of sinners from spiritual bondage, and their pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem, under the care and protection of their God and Saviour. You, who have been long enslaved to sin and Satan, are exhorted to go forth from your captivity, and enter on this pilgrimage. Difficulties and dangers may await you in the road; for the present evil world, through which you are to pass, is a desert land, where insidious enemies may endeavour to insnare, to plunder, and destroy you; where many ravenous beasts may attack you with violence. But the Lord himself will be with you by the way, as your Leader and Commander: He will provide for you, so that you shall neither hunger nor thirst; He will be “as a hiding-place from the wind and a covert from the tempest, as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land:” and under His defence, whatever opposition may be raised, “the redeemed of the Lord shall return, and come with singing unto Zion, and everlasting joy shall be upon their head.”* Will not this suffice? In dependence on your heavenly Conductor, arise and depart; and cheerfully sustain your most painful trials in the prospect of that felicity which he has prepared. “He will guide you with his counsel, and afterward receive you to glory.”† O, for the Spirit of God to be poured

* Isa. xxxii. 2. xlii. 16. xlix. 10. li. 11. lv. 4.

† Psal. lxxiii. 24.

out in a more abundant measure, that men of ardent piety and zeal, like Ezra, may stand forth as leaders in the church, to call sinners out of their captivity, and go before them in the way to Zion!

No sooner had Ezra arrived at Jerusalem than he set himself with vigour to promote the work of God. But he met with unexpected difficulties. A considerable declension had taken place among the people; and therefore it required his utmost exertion to reform the abuses which had been admitted. They had turned aside to the abominations of their Heathen neighbours, in consequence of forming alliances and intermarriages with them; and what rendered the custom more general, and discouraged even an attempt to remedy it, was, that "the princes and rulers were chief in this trespass."*

We have had frequent occasion, in commenting on the sacred history, to remark the many bad effects which follow from the connexion of religious persons with those who know not God. It appears to have been clearly forbidden, and that on the justest grounds, in order to preserve the purity of revelation, and to guard against all corruptions both in principle and practice. Intermarriages of this kind have always been attended with mischiefs of the most serious nature. While men and women consult only their passions or their worldly convenience, in the choice of their partners for life, what can we expect but that they will be compliant enough to sacrifice the interests of truth,

* Ezra ix. 1, &c.

neglect the divine ordinances, conform to the world, and bring up their children in ignorance of God, and in the fashionable vices of the age? Ah! whither must such a conduct tend, but to the utter subversion of all real religion?

Ezra was greatly affected when informed of these abuses. Confounded, and overwhelmed with grief, he sat down in silent astonishment, with all the marks of unutterable distress. His behaviour excited the public attention; and at length all those, "who trembled at the words of the God of Israel," joined his company: after which, in the most open manner, he made known the anguish of his soul unto God. With deepest humiliation he confessed the ingratitude and perverseness of the people, who, in contempt of the goodness and contrary to the express command of God, had contracted alliances with the Heathens; and he acknowledged that they had nothing to look for at His hands but entire destruction. It should seem that he was almost afraid to deprecate the vengeance they had deserved; but he referred the matter to the Lord.

Was this a needless concern? Or, rather, does it not become each one of us to weep and to pray, because iniquity abounds; especially when we observe very awful declensions and corrupt practices in the church of God? Are these nothing to us? Do they excite in us no painful sensations? Do we not feel emotions similar to those of Ezra, when we see God dishonoured, his name reproached, and his cause sinking into neglect? Then let us offer to Him our im-

portunate petitions, that He may yet arise and have mercy upon Zion, and purge away our transgressions. But, alas ! we have few persons, like Ezra, to “ stand in the gap.” A general conformity to the present world has left us but little of the power of godliness. Even those, who should possess the greatest purity and zeal “ have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations. If we cannot correct these abuses, at least “ our souls should weep for them in secret places.”

Some, indeed, are bound by their office to do more than privately lament the prevalence of sin ; for they should exert their abilities and influence to oppose it. The ministers of God, you will allow, must reprove, warn, and exhort, “ cry aloud and spare not, and show the people their transgressions.” Without fearing their displeasure, they must not only intercede with God for their conversion and forgiveness, but declare his wrath against the offences, which are countenanced by general custom, even though the principal men be “ chief in the trespass.” Entreat them not to keep silence, much less to cry Peace, peace ; for, if they do not admonish you to turn from your evil ways, from your pride, sensuality and profaneness, your “ blood will be required at their hands.” But magistrates should interfere in a manner which belongs not to ministers. They should vigorously use the authority with which they are intrusted to prevent and punish outward irregularities, and “ not bear the sword in vain.”

Ezra was not only a preacher of righteousness, but also a civil officer, commissioned with full power to regulate the affairs both of church and state, to correct as well as censure abuses. The distress he had discovered soon excited a general alarm among the people. Perhaps he himself was ready to despond; but when he perceived favourable marks of real contrition in them, and some persons of influence had promised him their support, immediately with great earnestness he entered on the work of reformation.* According to the law of Moses, marriages with idolaters were expressly forbidden; and therefore it was judged expedient, agreeably to the spirit of that law, that they should put away their strange wives, or those at least who refused to renounce their Pagan superstitions. He assembled all the men of Judah; and, after reproving them for their sin, he found them deeply affected with a sense of guilt, and unanimously resolving to comply with his injunctions. Many of them “trembled at the commandment of God?” and the whole company bound themselves by a solemn covenant to do His will; so that, probably, through Ezra’s exertions, a considerable revival of religion took place.

Years before For a long time he continued to labour
Christ, 445. at Jerusalem in the cause of truth and righteousness. Thirteen years afterwards, when he was superseded in his commission as a magistrate by the appointment of Nehemiah, yet as a priest and a scribe he still taught and exhorted the people.† He brought forth the word of God, which he read and expounded

* Ezra x. 1, &c.

† Nehem. viii. 1, &c.

to an immense congregation, upon whom his instructions produced the best effects.—It is generally supposed that he collected together the books of the Old Testament, then received in the church (to which also he is thought to have added several of his own composition), and that he dispersed correct copies of them through the land. Thus his private studies, as well as his public efforts, were a peculiar blessing not only during his own time, but to succeeding ages.—By our various talents we may promote the interests of religion in various ways. Such wisdom, piety, and zeal, as we have here contemplated, must be extensively useful. We ourselves enjoy the benefits of his labours; for the Scriptures, which he compiled, are come down to us. We thank God for these sacred writings, now confirmed and illustrated by the still clearer declarations of the New Testament. They are the ground of our hope, the rule of our conduct, the source of all our consolation. Let us value them as we ought, and endeavour, like Ezra, to spread them in the world. This must be the most effectual method “to turn men from darkness to light, from the power of Satan unto God.” To this, in a great measure, we must ascribe the success of our reformers; nor can we expect any great increase of genuine and fervent piety, except the word of God be generally read and expounded among us.

Ezra has exhibited an illustrious pattern to the ministers of God, who should learn from him to “take heed unto themselves and unto their doctrine.”—“He prepared his own heart to seek the law of the Lord,

and to do it;" and then he instructed the people; In vain do they attempt to teach others, if they be not themselves impressed with divine things, and established in the love of the truth. Their own hearts must feel the reality and excellence of those principles which they inculcate, or else it is most probable that their exhortations will be cold and ineffectual. All the faithful ambassadors of Christ should be able to say with the Apostle, "We believe, and therefore we speak."*

But this is not the concern of your spiritual pastors only. Whatever be your station or abilities, you are required to exert yourselves for the honour of God and the advantage of his church. "Come to the help of the Lord:" yet proceed not rashly to the work. While you are solicitous to reform and save others, begin with yourselves. Consider the worth of your own souls; so will the souls of your fellow-creatures appear of infinite value in your esteem; and when you have complied with the demands of the Gospel, and tasted its sweetness, you can direct, counsel, and encourage them. Is it your desire? Ah! how many are perfectly indifferent about the eternal states both of themselves and of all around them! The ministers and people of God all see the necessity of exemplary strictness, and unwearied diligence: and are you at liberty to trifle with divine things, as if they were of no importance? While you hear of any one laying himself out in the service of his God, and for the best interests of men, you

* 2 Cor. iv. 13.

should be afraid for yourselves ; for such an instance will render your remissness the more inexcusable. May God pour out his Spirit to enlighten his church with the knowledge of his word, and inspire every member of it with an abundant measure of faith, love, and zeal, that He may be glorified among us through Jesus Christ ! Amen.

N E H E M I A H.

CHAP. XX.

Nehemiah, cupbearer to Artaxerxes—distressed for Jerusalem—went with the king's leave, and repaired that city—reproached and opposed—his faith and diligent attention—his liberality—resisted the various devices of his adversaries—his care for the government of the city—directed the Scriptures to be read—a fast kept, and a solemn covenant made—dedicated the walls to God—at his second journey to Jerusalem, found and corrected various abuses—appealed to God concerning his services.

AT the period to which we are now come in our consideration of Scripture Characters, the states of both Greece and Rome were rising to great eminence and dominion, and many persons of the highest reputation for genius and learning flourished in those nations. Of these, however, the sacred records make no account, but direct our whole attention to the little remnant of Israelites, who had just escaped from their captivity; for the small society of the church is dearer to God than all the families or all the empires of the earth. An EZRA and a NEHEMIAH are more truly honourable than the most renowned warriors and philosophers of the Pagan world.

The history of Nehemiah very properly follows that of Ezra, with which it is immediately connected ; for the former succeeded the latter, as governor of Jerusalem, at the distance of about twelve years. The restoration of the Jews was not then complete. Many had gained a comfortable settlement under the Persians in different parts, who might therefore be unwilling to return. Of this sort, probably, was the father of Nehemiah, who seems to have possessed considerable credit at Shushan, where he obtained for his son a place of great rank and profit, the office of cupbearer to King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah, then, from his very situation, enjoyed the most convenient opportunities of soliciting any favour from the prince, to whom he ministered ; nor did he fail to improve the advantage, for he exerted all his influence in behalf of his distressed countrymen the Jews.

We have seen, from various instances, that persons of real and fervent piety may reside even in a palace, and that too among idolaters. So circumstanced, indeed, they are exposed to peculiar snares and difficulties ; but on this very account the grace of God is magnified the more by their firmness, courage, and perseverance in the profession and defence of true religion. Such was Nehemiah : may we, in a lower condition, be enabled to resist the temptations which beset us, and not be ashamed to avow ourselves on the side of the despised people of God ! May we labour, with unwearied diligence, to promote the interests of his church, and, like Nehemiah, turn our hearts towards

Jerusalem, "to raise up the decayed places thereof," and "to repair the breaches!"

Years before Christ, 445. He dwelt in the court of Artaxerxes, where he might have lived in ease and splendour, and every sensual gratification; but he was willing to forego all private considerations when the glory of God was at stake. It may appear suspicious if those pretend to renounce the world, and to be dead to its enjoyments, who are cut off from all possibility of attaining them; but to reject its enticing offers, and then to be crucified to it, when most solicited to join in its pleasures,—this is a strong proof and an illustrious display of divine grace. We have already seen, in the history of Moses and Daniel, that "faith overcometh the world;" and the very same excellent spirit, which they discovered amidst the magnificence of a palace, rested on Nehemiah. His greatness and dignity were irksome to him, when he heard that the people of God, to whom he thought it his honour to be allied, "were in great affliction and reproach," left defenceless and exposed to the assaults of their surrounding enemies. "He sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven."* He confessed the justice of God in their severest calamities, and, from the remembrance of former gracious deliverances, was encouraged to implore his merciful interposition, particularly requesting that the king's heart might be disposed to favour and assist his plan.

* Nehem. i. 1, &c.

The distress of his mind soon appeared in the gloom of his countenance; and to the inquiries of Artaxerxes concerning it he frankly declared that it arose from the desolate condition of Jerusalem.* He was then emboldened to make known his wishes; but, before he offered his petition, though he was waiting as an attendant in the royal presence, he darted up an earnest supplication to Heaven for its success. We fear such piety as this is uncommon in a courtier. But, whatever we are, in all our concerns and undertakings, it is incumbent upon us to "commit our way unto the Lord:" nor can any situation or circumstances prevent us from calling down His help by an ejaculatory kind of address, which, though short and interrupted, generally discovers a peculiar ardour of mind, and prevails to obtain the blessing. It may be used in a crowd as well as in the closet.

After seeking to God for direction and assistance, we may be the more emboldened to proceed. Nehemiah solicited leave of his sovereign to go, and build and fortify Jerusalem; nor did he fail in his request. Hear his graceful acknowledgment; "The king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me." What a firm persuasion did this express of the overruling influence of God upon the heart of his royal master! The favour procured was, also, the more precious, as being received in answer to prayer. Will not this reprove the infidelity, we had almost said the atheism, of many amongst us? In pursuing your schemes of business, do you not depend on your

* Nehem. ii. 1, &c.

own wisdom and good management to acquire success, and disdain to ask it as a petitioner at the throne of grace? Or, if by extreme difficulties you have been driven to make supplication to Heaven, have you been as loud in your thanksgivings as you were in your cries for deliverance? Is it the language of your minds, "This has been granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me?"

With a full commission for the execution of his designs, and conducted by the king's guards, Nehemiah left the court, and undertook the wearisome and dangerous journey, animated with this one desire, "to seek the welfare of the children of Israel." How rare is such self-denial, such a readiness to suffer for religion! Many, who speak well of Christ, and profess good wishes for the advancement of his cause, when the strength of their attachment is tried, are unwilling to sacrifice their pleasures, ease, or preferment; and therefore they care not that the church is harassed and oppressed, while they are eagerly pursuing their own private advantage and indulgence. Ah! where shall we find any resemblance of the pious disinterestedness of Nehemiah, who, from an unfeigned love to God and his people, forsook the palace of Artaxerxes, and submitted to a state of difficulty, contempt, and opposition, at Jerusalem?

This was the city which God had chosen to put his name there, in which the temple was built, and the holy solemnities celebrated. While Jerusalem remained in a desolate condition, there could be but little hope of the progress of religion. Much had

been done, under Zerubbabel and Ezra, to repair her waste places ; but much was still left for Nehemiah to accomplish. The walls were broken down, and the inhabitants continually liable to the incursions and devastations of their hostile neighbours. Behold, then, this zealous governor, exerting himself for the restoration and defence of Zion. He had mourned and prayed for her ; now, with an astonishing firmness and ardour, he undertook the most laborious work on her behalf. Soon after his arrival, he began the necessary preparations ; and, to prevent his designs being frustrated, he carefully examined the state of the city by night. Having assembled the priests and rulers, he declared his purpose, and the object of his commission, and exhorted them to second his endeavours with the utmost vigour. Nor did he impose a toil upon others, to which he would not himself submit ; he did not leave it to underlings ; but “ Come,” said he, “ and let us build up the wall of Jerusalem, that we be no more a reproach.” Such an attempt as this could scarcely fail of succeeding ; for who could resist the call ? They instantly replied, “ Let us rise up and build.”—“ So they strengthened their hands for this good work.”

The application to ourselves is obvious. Jerusalem, indeed, has long since been destroyed ; but the church of Christ solicits your help. Is not this holy city desolate, and exposed to various assaults ? And does the consideration of its low state cause you any grief ? Do you fast and pray, and labour to promote its advancement ? Though you possess not the power and abilities of Nehemiah, are you exerting what you have ?

It may be expedient for you to exhort others ; but let them see that you yourselves are in earnest, and that you decline no task which you would enjoin them. Your counsels will be most likely to be regarded, when recommended by your own example. We fear that other inferior concerns, business, pleasures, or the support of a party, engage your attention ; and that Zion and her welfare are nothing to you. Perhaps you are so far from building up, that you would demolish, the walls of Jerusalem. Ah ! what madness is this ! for “ God is in the midst of her ;” and will you presume to fight against the omnipotent Jehovah ?

The pleas commonly urged in excuse for inactivity and cowardice are such as these, “ We are so feeble and inconsiderable, that our assistance would avail nothing ;—it were vain to make any attempt for the honour of God in our narrow sphere of action.”—If you think meanly of yourselves, it is well : but if you are unwilling to put yourselves to trouble, or if you cannot trust the Lord for strength, protection, and success in the performance of your duty, you are “ the fearful and unbelieving,---the wicked and slothful servants,” who will be “ cast into outer darkness.”

“ Difficulties are in the way :”---then be the more vigorous to overcome them. “ But we have many adversaries :”---so indeed you must have, if you work the work of God ; and, if this argument be of any weight, Nehemiah might have remained at Shushan. We shall observe, that, though he possessed so excellent a spirit, and acted from such pure disinterested motives, he was resisted and vilified, as if he had been

the basest character. Yet he persevered and prospered against the bitterest persecution. May we learn to suffer with a similar meekness, firmness, and courage!

No sooner was his design known in Judea than certain powerful enemies discovered the utmost chagrin. They began to reproach and ridicule his attempt; but he regarded not their words, declaring that he trusted in the God of Heaven for support. The opposition seemed to increase in its violence: yet, while they set upon him with a mixture of contempt and indignation, he betook himself to prayer, and committed his cause to God.* They formed a conspiracy to attack Jerusalem with an armed force, and demolish the fortification. His own people, also, were dispirited; and, through excess of fatigue, they desired to decline the further prosecution of the plan. But the good man remained unshaken and undaunted; and by his prudent and pious conduct the adversaries were utterly baffled. He sought help from God by fervent supplication, and at the same time neglected not the proper means of defence; for he appointed a watch to observe their motions day and night. By his animated address he raised the drooping minds of his countrymen; and afterwards they proceeded with uncommon cheerfulness and vigour. Even while they continued to labour with one hand, in the other they held a weapon; and so incessant was their attention to the work, that they did not allow themselves to put off their clothes for sleep. How eminent a pattern of entire reliance upon God, ac-

* Nehem. iv. 1, &c.

accompanied with circumspection and diligence in duty, notwithstanding extreme difficulties and distress !

These strenuous efforts for the fortifying of the city seem to have been interrupted awhile by the complaints of the people, who were involved in the heaviest calamities.* Through the pressure of famine, they had been obliged to mortgage their lands and houses, and even to sell their children to their richer brethren, for the purchase of provisions, and the payment of the king's tribute. They therefore represented their grievances to Nehemiah, and stated that the utmost exaction and cruelty had been practised upon them. Immediately he took up their cause, and set himself with great firmness to procure them redress. He rebuked the men of power and opulence for their usurious and oppressive conduct, declaring, "It is not good that ye do ; ought ye not to walk in the fear of our God, because of the reproach of the Heathen our enemies ?" What a forcible argument for a holy vigilance, to those who are truly concerned for the glory of God ! May it produce its proper influence upon us ! Have we not those around us, who narrowly observe our spirit and behaviour, and would not fail to reproach us with the least inconsistency ? On their account, therefore, we should be the more careful "to walk in the fear of our God : " and thus an Apostle exhorts, "that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed." †

The pious governor, not content with reproof, corrected the abuse. He required the nobles and the rulers to make restitution, and promise, by a solemn

* Nehem. v. 1, &c.

† 1 Tim. vi. 1.

covenant, never to renew the extortion. His example, indeed, might have shamed them out of their mean and injurious practices. He had left a situation of great ease, honour, and profit; and not only forbore to receive the support due to his office for twelve years, but at an immense expense maintained his numerous attendants, in order to carry on the work, and hospitably entertained at his table above a hundred and fifty persons more. For all this he expected no recompense from men; but he rejoiced in the thought that it would be favourably regarded by a faithful and gracious God.—This is such an instance of noble and disinterested liberality as is rarely to be met with. Yet, wherever the love of God expands the heart, the hand also will be open to promote his cause and relieve his people. Let us beware of covetousness, which is inimical to true religion, and has been the source of infinite mischief and misery in the world. We have heard of those, who have thereby “erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.”* But here we see the Prophet’s declaration exemplified; “the liberal deviseth liberal things, and by liberal things shall he stand.”†

Nehemiah felt further difficulties from outward opposition: and this, too, was aided by a traitorous correspondence, which some of the nobles within the city carried on. His adversaries tried various stratagems to destroy him, or to divert him from his work through terror.‡ They pretended to invite him to a friendly

* 1 Tim. vi. 10. † Isa. xxxii. 8. ‡ Nehem. vi. 1, &c.

conference ; but he discovered their malicious design, and therefore prudently replied, that such and so important were his engagements, as not to allow the least avocation. Four times together they failed of succeeding by this artifice. Then they cast upon him the old stale reproach, that his only object was to stir up sedition, and renounce his alleageiance to his prince. The infamous charge was denied with all the firmness of integrity ; yet it occasioned some fear in the minds of the people ; and Nehemiah found it necessary to implore the help of God, that his hands might be strengthened.

At last they contrived another scheme : under a pretence of consulting his safety, they wished to draw him into a dishonourable conduct, in which they would have triumphed. They therefore hired a false prophet, who feigned a revelation, and advised the governor to take refuge in the temple, that he might preserve his threatened life. Here, however, they were disappointed as before ; for, with an undaunted courage, a steadfast dependence upon God, and a strict regard to the credit of that religion which he professed, he replied, “ Should such a man as I flee ?—I will not go in.”

You, who are the disciples of Christ, should be aware that similar snares will probably be laid for you, and that a similar caution and fortitude on your part will secure you from many dangers. Your enemies may invite you to join their councils, and to visit them on terms of intimacy. But say, as Nehemiah, “ I am doing a great work : I cannot come down.” They may impute to you the basest intentions, and accuse

you as discontented and seditious persons. But repel the charge without being disheartened by it; and cry earnestly to God, that amidst their clamours He would "strengthen your hands." They may endeavour to terrify you by various menaces; and, if they so far prevail as to stagger your faith, they will succeed to your hurt. How awful will be the consequence, if "a standard-bearer faint," if a Christian of peculiar eminence, or long continuance in the church, fall from his steadfastness, or renounce his principles! Be ready therefore to answer, "Should such a man as I flee?"

Their design was to reproach Nehemiah with the very sin to which they tempted him: and this is the common practice of Satan and his agents. They will propose and recommend to you such a conduct as they know to be inconsistent with your character and engagements; and, if you comply, they will despise and upbraid you for it. But, by a bold and strict adherence to your religious professions, you will impress them with a secret reverence and esteem for you; at least, you will appear honourable in their eyes, even though they hate you. Thus you will confound their purposes, whilst you are proof against seduction. Thus also you will ensure to yourselves the protection of a faithful Almighty God, who will preserve you amidst multiplied dangers, and prosper your pious designs for the glory of his name.

At length, in fifty-two days, the city was enclosed, the wall completed, and the gates set up, through Nehemiah's uncommon assiduity and perseverance. Then indeed his malicious opponents were astonished

and dejected, and constrained to acknowledge the hand of God in the event. “They were much cast down in their own eyes, for they perceived that this work was wrought of our God.”—Such also will be the happy issue to you, “who, by patient continuance in well-doing, seek for glory, and honour, and immortality.” The Lord, whom you serve with diligence and fidelity, will support you through all your trials, and finally “perfect that which concerneth you.”* “They, who, hate you, will see it and be ashamed.”† For “they shall be troubled with terrible fear, and shall be amazed at the strangeness of your salvation, so far beyond all that they looked for.”‡ How wretched, then, is their state, to whom it will be said, “Behold, ye despisers, and wonder, and perish!”§

The work of fortification being ended, proper measures were adopted for internal regulation. Nehemiah deputed faithful men, who should take the charge of the town, of its government and defence, while he, probably, returned to the court of Artaxerxes.¶ But he had a higher concern for his countrymen than merely of a political kind; for it was his grand object to establish among them the service and worship of God. In conjunction with Ezra the scribe, he caused the Scriptures to be publicly read and expounded to them, the good effects of which immediately appeared.¶¶ They saw, confessed, and lamented, with deep contrition and distress, the heinousness of their guilt; yet he encouraged them, for that season especially, to indulge

* Psal. cxxxviii. 8. † lxxxvi. 17. ‡ Wisd. v. 2.

§ Acts xiii. 41. ¶ Nehem. vii. 1, &c. ¶¶ vii. 1, &c.

a holy joy, as this would minister strength to their souls, and bear them up above all their trials. The celebration of the sacred festivals, appointed by the law, was renewed. A solemn fast was instituted, and kept with a peculiar seriousness by all the people. They assembled before God with all the marks of unfeigned repentance, acknowledged their iniquities, and earnestly implored the divine forgiveness and favour.* Nor was this all: they entered into an express covenant with God, declaring their entire devotedness to Him in a written agreement, which they signed and sealed. They bound themselves to take the word of God for their guide and direction; to renounce all intimate connexions with their idolatrous neighbours; to guard against every profanation of the sabbath; and to adhere with great care and exactness to all the services of the temple.† Nehemiah also provided for the better defence of the city, by promoting an increase of its inhabitants. For that purpose he ordered, that, besides the rulers, and those who offered themselves freely, every tenth person should be chosen by lot, out of the rest of the people, to dwell at Jerusalem.‡ These necessary regulations being settled, the walls of the town, erected with so much labour, were dedicated to God with all the solemnities of devotion; and loud acclamations of gratitude and joy were raised to Him, who had engaged to protect the place for his own name's sake.§

* Nehem. ix. 1, &c.

† x. 1, &c.

‡ xi. 1, &c.

§ xii. 27, &c.

We perceive, through the whole of this history, that an upright pious governor is an invaluable blessing. Though religion be not, as some assert, a mere state engine, it is admirably adapted to promote the welfare and prosperity of nations, as well as of individuals. Those, then, who despise and oppose divine revelation, are the greatest enemies, not only to the spiritual and eternal interests, but to the temporal happiness and security, of their fellow-creatures. Yet such we have among ourselves, who, while they plead for what they call "freethinking," undermine the very foundations of civil society.—If they, who possess authority, firmly believe the Scriptures, they will be anxious to spread the knowledge of them, and will appoint and enforce the solemn celebration of the sacred ordinances. They will most effectually consult the real good of the community, by providing public means of instruction in the word of God. For we doubt not that the faithful preaching of the Gospel, seriously attended to, would repress the wickedness of the world more than prisons, chains, and gallows.

Years before
Christ, about
430. Nehemiah returned to his office at the Persian court, and, after some time, obtained leave of the king to revisit Jerusalem.* In his absence various abuses were introduced: so continually prone is man to depart from the way of righteousness, and to revert to his evil practices, from which he may seem to be reclaimed! Through the treachery of Eliashib the chief priest, Tobiah, that bold and presumptuous enemy of God and his people, had large apart-

* Nehem. xiii. 6, &c.

ments prepared for him in the buildings of the temple, to the exclusion of the holy vessels and offerings, to the vile profanation of that sacred place, and the interruption of the divine service. Nehemiah was grieved for the declension which he found upon coming back; and immediately he set himself to oppose and reform the corruptions. He cast out Tobiah from his possession, notwithstanding his high connexions; reprehended the rulers for their desertion of the house of God; and restored the Levites to their employments and tithes.

The day of the Lord, also, was neglected and polluted; for many devoted it to the purposes of labour and merchandise, in contempt of an express commandment. But the pious magistrate reprov'd and threatened the offenders, and thus checked the horrid violation. How important an object for the attention of governors! For the strict observation of the sabbath is not only necessary to the progress and the very being of religion, but also conducive to the comfort and welfare of society.

Intermarriages with idolaters had likewise prevailed afresh. But here again the authority of Nehemiah interposed. He very sharply censured, warned, and punished the guilty persons, though some were high in rank and office; and, after separating them from their profane connexions, he obliged them to enter into a solemn covenant with God that they would never renew them. Let Christian believers keep at a distance from such alliances as these, lest they abandon

or disgrace their principles, and “ concerning faith make shipwreck.”

We have seen, then, through the whole spirit and conduct of this holy man, an uniform abhorrence of evil, and a zealous concern for the service and glory of God ; a disregard of his own ease and interest, and a readiness to suffer any thing for the good of the church. What a pattern, not to magistrates alone, but to those who fill a private station ! Doubtless we may all assist in the great work of reformation. How much is wanted ! and how much might be effected by proper exertions ! But let us remember to begin with ourselves. Though others may be unwilling, let us determine to renounce and oppose every wicked way. For, “ except we repent, we shall all perish.”

In the perusal of Nehemiah’s history, we are struck with the frequent appeals he makes to the God of heaven, respecting his own performances. After relating what he had done for his people, he cries out again and again, “ Think upon me, my God, for good :— Remember me, O my God, concerning this ; and wipe not out my good deeds, &c.”* Such language may seem inconsistent with the diffidence and contrition of a truly humble mind, convinced of the deficiency and defilement of its most holy duties. Ah ! who shall dare to mention his own righteousness in the presence of his God and Judge ? For “ in His sight shall no man living be justified.”† But we ap-

* Nehem. v. 19. xiii. 14, 31.

† Peal. cxliii. 2.

prehend that Nehemiah spake not with the arrogant expectations of a Pharisee, as if he had any claim upon God for his services, or trusted to them for his acceptance and salvation. For it is evident he felt and confessed himself a sinner, who could demand nothing from God, on the ground of justice, when he exclaimed, "Spare me, according to the greatness of thy mercy."* But we should recollect that he received no recompense, no grateful acknowledgment, from men: probably he lay under much reproach, and his very good was evil-spoken of. Turning from them, therefore, for whom he laboured without any prospect of a reward at their hands, he might look up to God with a cheerful hope that what he had effected in His cause would not be overlooked by Him; and, satisfied with the divine approbation, however misrepresented upon earth, he might devoutly pray, "Think upon me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people."

It will be well if we also can appeal from the judgment of men to that of the great Searcher of hearts, as to our sincerity, and can be content to wait for the retribution of our services till the last day. We may safely rely upon the promise, and even plead it with God, that a cup of cold water, administered to a disciple from a real regard to Christ, shall not be unnoticed. It is not inconsistent with faith, but rather an exercise of it, to expect and ask what He has pledged himself to bestow. While we

* Nehem. xiii. 22.

“ have respect unto the recompense of reward,” we remember this is given us by the covenant, and is entirely “ of grace, not of debt.” For, after a life of unwearied activity and extensive usefulness, we shall still see cause to abhor ourselves, and repent in dust and ashes ; and must cry out, with Nehemiah, “ Spare me, O my God, according to the greatness of thy mercy !”

ESTHER, HAMAN,

AND

MORDECAI.

CHAP. XXI.

Esther, a captive Jewess at Shushan, chosen to be queen—Mordecai, her cousin, porter in the palace, refused to reverence Haman, the prime minister ; who, being thereby incensed, procured an edict for the destruction of the Jews—Esther, animated by Mordecai sought and obtained favour for the Jews—Mordecai honoured for his fidelity to the king—Haman mortified—hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai—Esther and Mordecai continued to exert their influence for the protection of the Jews.

IT is the wise and gracious appointment of our God that his church in general, as a society, and each of its members in particular, must pass through much tribulation. They are called to struggle with a variety of difficulties, in some of which they may seem almost overwhelmed, "ready to perish." But, while their faith is thus put to the trial, the grace of God is manifested in their holy conduct ; His power, truth, and love, are displayed by the deliverances wrought for them. An infallible assurance also is given them that they shall

finally prevail over all the opposition of their enemies, and be preserved to the heavenly kingdom, where they shall be crowned with victory and glory for ever.

We have had frequent occasions to remark, that man's natural aversion to real godliness, which at all times disposes him to persecute, has in some instances been permitted to proceed so far, as to threaten the very existence of the church. But when all hope of safety was removed, God himself has miraculously interposed for his great name's sake, to the comfort of his people, and the confusion of his adversaries "The wicked plotteth against the just, and gnasheth upon him with his teeth: The Lord shall laugh at him; for He seeth that his day is coming."* This is a general observation, which has been verified in every age: we shall now find it to be illustrated and confirmed by the singular history, recorded in the book of Esther. Here the providence of God, protecting his church, and defeating the counsels of its bitterest opposers, appears in a striking light. We shall be instructed by it to trust ourselves with Him, under the darkest and most distressful dispensations, being firmly persuaded that He will fulfil his own promise, "Lo! I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world."†

This little narrative relates a particular deliverance of the Jews, effected at a time when they were threatened with immediate and entire destruction, under the

* Psal. xxxvii. 12, 13.

† Matt. xxviii. 20.

reign of Ahasuerus, one of the Persian monarchs. He is thought to have been the same with that Artaxerxes from whom Ezra received his commission ; for, at the period to which these transactions are referred, the Jews were far from being completely recovered from their captivity, but were still dispersed in very large numbers throughout the Persian dominions. The book has its name from Esther, who was a principal instrument of accomplishing the deliverance ; but it directs our attention also to two other characters, who are conspicuous in the history, Haman, a bitter persecutor, and Mordecai, a zealous defender, of the church. May we all learn from it the folly, sin, and danger of fighting against God ; and be so convinced of the security and happiness of his people amidst all their trials, as to join their society, and say, “ We will go with you ; for we have heard that God is with you. !”*

The Lord God, who is perfectly acquainted with Years before his own plans and purposes from the beginning, had previously prepared, in the court of Ahasuerus, an advocate and a patron for the despised and oppressed seed of Abraham. Christ, about 460. We forbear to dwell upon the magnificence, luxury, and excess, of the feast which the king celebrated in his palace, and which gave occasion to the divorce of his queen, Vashti. † But in that event we perceive and admire the overruling influence of Jehovah, whose prerogative it is to govern the sinful passions of men, so as to render them subservient to his own glory ! Whilst they

* Zech. viii. 23.

† Esth. i. 1, &c.

follow their hearts' desires, they infallibly proceed "to do whatsoever His hand and His counsels determined before to be done."*

To supply the place of the discarded Vashti, another royal consort was to be chosen: and do we not wonder that Esther, a young Jewess, should be raised to this honour? She was then in a state of captivity at Shushan; and being an orphan, she had been brought up by her cousin Mordecai, to whom she paid the attention and obedience due to a parent.† She possessed such a peculiar gracefulness and beauty, that she soon attracted the notice, and gained the affections, of the king. At Mordecai's request she had not discovered her extraction, as that might have prevented her advancement. But we are to ascribe her exaltation to God who "putteth down one, and setteth up another," who "raiseth up the poor out of the dust, that He may set him with princes:"‡ for He had designed to make use of her influence at court for great good, Mordecai also was intended to be an instrument in promoting the same gracious purpose. But for some time he remained in a low situation, as a porter, or inferior officer, in the palace. Yet even there he performed such a service as entitled him to the royal favour, and paved the way for his future preferment; for he saved the life of his sovereign by detecting and disclosing a conspiracy which had been formed against him. How remarkably does one little inci-

* Acts iv. 28. † Esth. ii. 5. &c.

‡ Psal. lxxv. 7. cxiii. 7, 8.

dent lead to another, and that to a third, on which events of the highest importance to the whole world finally depend.

Such was the posture of affairs when Haman rose to the first dignity in the state, and obtained the place of prime minister over that extensive empire.* He is supposed to have been of the cursed seed of Amalek, and a descendant of Agag, whom Saul had been commanded to destroy: and for that reason, perhaps, he might be particularly offensive to the Jews, and their decided enemy. The king had enjoined persons of all ranks to bow down to Haman with the utmost reverence and homage; and Mordecai alone refused to render him this honour. It may not be easy to ascertain the true motive for his refusal. His objection, probably, was not merely that Haman was of a profane character, but either that he required an idolatrous kind of veneration, or that he sprang from that nation whom God had pronounced accursed, and ordered to be extirpated.† At least, from Mordecai's general reputation, we presume that he acted, on this occasion, not from pride or obstinacy, but from a real conscientious principle. Such a treatment, however, from a person so much his inferior, Haman could not bear. And now we shall behold in this Amalekite the most detestable tempers, and the miserable effects of hatred, malice, and an unsatisfied, disappointed, ambition.

“ He was full of wrath;” and immediately he proceeded to seek revenge. How insatiable was his fury!

* Esth. iii. 1, &c. † Dr. Prid. Connect. Part i. Book 5.

The blood of one poor Jew would not suffice : he determined that thousands should bleed with him. Being informed of Mordecai's extraction and religious scruples, he conceived the design of exterminating the whole race together, so that, if it were possible, "the name of Israel might be no more in remembrance." The old antipathy, then, of Amalek against Israel, still prevailed in Haman ; and opportunity was given him to show, though not to fulfil, what was in his heart. With all the superstition of an idolater, he cast lots, in order that he might be directed to the most convenient day for the execution of his plan ; and even this very circumstance the Lord himself overruled ; for the matter was so delayed as to afford time enough to defeat his purpose. He represented to the king that the Jews were of so singular, obstinate, and seditious a temper, that it would promote the safety of the government to destroy them all : and on this ground he obtained a decree for their utter extirpation, without regard to sex, age, or character. What a rash, impolitic, merciless edict ! and how depraved must be the man who could perpetrate or propose such a scheme of iniquity ! Yet Haman seemed unmoved ; or, rather, he rejoiced in the prospect of success ; for, when the royal proclamation was gone forth, he sat down to drink with his thoughtless prince.

Every thing, then, appeared in a favourable train for the accomplishment of the project. But, though sinners are permitted to proceed as it were to the very point they aim at, an invisible Almighty Power "puts his hook in their nose, and his bridle in their lips, and

turns them back.”* How vain and contemptible are the strongest assaults against Jehovah! “He, that sitteth in the heavens, shall laugh; the Lord shall have them in derision.”† Human aid will be found a poor support to our souls in the time of danger: but a reliance upon the divine mercy and truth will dispel our fears. Had Haman obtained his wish, and the Jewish nation perished, what must have become of all the promises? How could the prophecies concerning the great Redeemer of the world have been fulfilled? The everlasting covenant itself must have failed, before this diabolical system could take place. But whence was deliverance to be expected? It is not often we are able to point out the method in which God will interpose to help us; and yet it is our part to wait in faith and hope. “His way is in the sea, and his path in the great waters, and his footsteps are not known.”‡

On the publication of the edict, the utmost horror and confusion overwhelmed the poor persecuted people who were marked out for ruin. Mordecai expressed the anguish of his heart by all external signs of deep sorrow, and by his loud and bitter cries throughout the city.§ At length Queen Esther herself received information of the intended massacre, and participated with her devoted countrymen in their distress. Mordecai charged her to exert all her influence with the king on their behalf. But she was afraid even to present her supplication; for the Persian laws forbade every person, not excepting the royal consort, on pain

* 2 Kings xix. 28.

† Psal. ii. 4.

‡ lxxvii. 19,

§ Esth. iv. 1, &c.

of death, to approach the sovereign without his call ; and she had some reason to apprehend that his affection for her was abated. She expostulated, therefore, with Mordecai, on the impropriety of venturing to offer her petition, when she must forfeit her life, unless she could gain so favourable an attention from him, that he would hold out his golden sceptre to her. Mordecai replied, with an astonishing firmness, that the bloody decree was levelled against her as well as other Jews, and that she must perish in the palace. He further remarked, that if she refused to mediate, deliverance would doubtless arise from a different quarter, while she and her kindred would be destroyed : but he encouraged her to hope that possibly her very exaltation had been appointed as the means of rescuing her nation. Upon this she hesitated no longer, but consented to hazard her safety : yet she depended not on her own ascendancy or management ; for, observing a solemn fast for three days, she first sought the divine direction and assistance, and then approached the king.

We ought to feel for the calamities of others, especially for those of the church ; and should be willing to incur dangers and distresses, that we may procure relief for them. Though we know not what instruments it may please God to make use of, such as we are we should devote ourselves, our interest, and abilities to Him, and rejoice to be employed in his service. It is an honourable cause to be engaged in ; so that if our offers should be rejected, and all our attempts should fail, we need not be ashamed. But we may expect great things at the hand of our God, and believe that,

for his own glory, He will graciously fulfil the desires which He has given us. Even a weak faith, such as Esther's seems to have been, has often produced wonderful effects. Doubtless incessant prayer ascended up to God on this occasion, which was a token for good; for the cries of His people have power with him, and bring down his blessings upon them. Ah! why are we so backward to apply to him in the perilous time? Why do we ever cast away our hope, as if "He had forgotten to be gracious?" He cannot be unmindful of those who firmly rely on him, and humbly supplicate his aid. These, therefore, though feeble in themselves, having the omnipotent God for their defence, are "terrible as an army with banners," and accordingly they have put their thousands to flight. In vain the proud Haman plans his bloody schemes; in vain Ahasuerus issues out his cruel edict, and millions in his empire prepare to massacre the Jews: the Lord listens to his afflicted servants, and rescues them from destruction.

Let us mark the steps by which this deliverance was effected. When Esther presented herself before the king, his heart was inclined to favour her, and grant her petition, even to the half of his dominions.* She requested that he and Haman would partake with her of an entertainment she had provided; which being acceded to, she desired that they would repeat their visit on the succeeding day. In the mean time, Haman, being elated with the honour of such a familiarity, boasted of it to his friends: yet his joy was damped,

* Esth. v. 1, &c.

and his indignation excited, while he observed that Mordecai still refused to show him any reverence. What a confession of the vanity of all worldly grandeur, and of the misery of a proud malignant spirit, did he make, when he said, "All this availeth me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate!" He, therefore, readily came into the proposal of dispatching this troublesome man; and, not content to wait for his removal till the general destruction intended for that people, immediately he prepared a gallows for his execution.

We perceive, in this arrogant minister of state, a character the most despicable and wretched. Yet many of those probably, whom the world admires and envies, as being exalted to the highest eminence, resemble Haman. Something is still wanted to complete their happiness: and, so long as any one wish of their hearts remains unsatisfied, all their other possessions avail them nothing; they can taste no sweetness in them. Persons of the greatest power and dignity must meet with disappointments and vexations of this kind, which embitter all their enjoyments. Such is the curse entailed upon human glory. Learn, then, that God alone can satisfy your desires: the whole creation could not fill or content your souls, but would leave an aching void, without Him. You "call the proud happy," who display much pomp and magnificence; but you are mistaken in your estimate. Many poor cottagers experience far less uneasiness than they. Felicity is necessarily connected with the disposition of

the mind; and an infallible Witness has said, "Blessed are the MEEK, for they shall inherit the earth."*

"On that night could not the king sleep:"† nor was there any visible cause of his disturbance: but we should remember that our rest depends on the good pleasure of the Lord. In that unquiet state he commanded the records of his kingdom to be read before him; and the very passage was recited, which contained the memorial of Mordecai's fidelity in discovering a dangerous conspiracy. As it appeared, also, that no reward had been conferred on this honest subject, Ahasuerus determined that he should immediately receive some signal mark of the royal favour. Haman was then waiting for an audience, to petition that Mordecai might be hanged upon the gallows; and, upon the question being put, "What shall be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honour?" this haughty minister suffered the most mortifying disappointment. He conceived himself to be the person intended, and therefore advised that the object of special regard should be led in triumph through the city, with all the pageantry of the Persian court; and he was instantly required to bestow these distinctions on the very Jew whose destruction he meditated, and to attend upon him as his servant.—What a coincidence of circumstances was here, all tending to introduce the deliverance of the Lord's people, and to defeat and abase the pride of their malicious persecutor! Who can forbear acknowledging, casual as these circumstances may appear, "The hand of the Lord hath done this?"

* Matt. v. 5,

† Esth. vi. 1, &c.

Haman, was completely confounded, and overwhelmed with anguish, foreboding his own total ruin. In the midst of his distress, he was called to accompany the king to Esther's banquet.* There the queen remonstrated against the cruel edict which had gone forth for the entire extirpation of her countrymen, and earnestly petitioned that both she and they might be rescued from the intended massacre. She further charged Haman with contriving that horrid wickedness; and instantly the incensed monarch commanded him to be dragged away, and to be hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. The estates also of the discarded minister were confiscated: and, being left to Esther's disposal, they were transferred to Mordecai, who was then advanced to the highest dignities in the state, and appointed successor to Haman.† Still the sanguinary decree remained, which Esther, therefore, with tears and importunity, besought the king to repeal. This would have been contrary to the principle of the Persian government, which permitted not its laws to be changed; and yet, to prevent the mischievous effects of his former edict, he issued out a second, allowing the Jews throughout the whole empire to arm themselves, and to slay all those who should dare to attack them.

The gracious interposition of God, in favour of this persecuted people, became so conspicuous, that not only they themselves perceived and acknowledged it with gratitude and joy, but others also felt a secret

* Esth. vii. 1, &c.

† viii. 1, &c.

reverence for them, joined their society, and embraced their religion. At length the decisive day arrived; and, though so remarkable an alteration had taken place in their behalf, and the sovereign had avowed himself their friend, so much enmity against them still subsisted, that great numbers rose up with an intent to destroy them.* But here again the Lord helped them, and fought their battles for them. Such was the influence of Mordecai, such the impression made upon the minds of men concerning them, that they had many powerful patrons and assistants; and thus they obtained an easy and complete victory over their adversaries. "No man could withstand them; for the fear of them fell upon the people." Above seventy-five thousand persons were slain on that occasion, through their malicious opposition to the cause of God: and it is particularly noticed that the ten sons of Haman perished miserably.

How signal, then, was the confusion, how entire the ruin, of the enemies of the church! "The Heathen are sunk down in the pit that they made: in the net, which they hid, is their own foot taken. The Lord is known by the judgment which He executeth; the wicked is snared in the work of his own hands. For, lo! thine enemies, O Lord, for, lo! thine enemies shall perish: all the workers of iniquity shall be scattered."† Let us not envy the prosperity of sinners; for "their triumphing is short." They shall be driven away in their wickedness, and shall receive their

* Esth. ix. 1, &c.

† Psal. ix. 15, 16. xcii. 9.

punishment, infinitely more tremendous than can be now conceived, in the world to come. Then the scene will indeed be changed; inasmuch as the proudest and most furious persecutors shall be ashamed and confounded for their hatred of true religion; and, instead of their profane scoffs and sensual mirth, "they shall lie down in sorrow," and experience throughout eternity "weeping, wailing, and gnashing of teeth."

Blessed be God, the hands of violence are restrained in our favoured nation; but is there nothing of the spirit of Haman discovered? What mean all the contemptuous speeches, and the cruel derisions, which wound the reputation of those who profess an ardent esteem for the Saviour, and tread in his steps? Let us ask the scorers, Against whom do ye sport yourselves? Is it not against Him, who will avenge the insults put upon his people? "Can your hearts endure, or can your hands be strong, in the days that he shall deal with you?"* Can you ward off the stroke of his justice, or stand against it? O, confess your folly, implore forgiveness, and join yourselves to those who are even now the objects of his care and love, and will be of his approbation and delight for ever.

The providence of God, in protecting his church, not only excited much thanksgiving at that time, but gave rise to an annual festival, the feast of Purim, † which is observed to this day, and by which the reality

* Ezek. xxii. 14.

† That is, the feast of Lots, so called from the lots cast by Haman, to fix the exact time of the destruction which he had planned.

of this history is clearly confirmed. The whole transaction displayed the goodness and faithfulness of God towards them that fear him ; and tended, under his controlling influence, to advance the interests of truth and righteousness. Mordecai filled his important station with ability and integrity, and in all the height of his prosperity appeared the firm friend of his despised brethren.* As he exerted his power for such a purpose, it is probable that he patronised those zealous reformers, Ezra and Nehemiah, and procured them their commissions for the better regulation of the city and temple of Jerusalem. Thus he proved an extensive blessing in his generation.

The Lord's merciful deliverances of his people should be had in remembrance. Let the glory of them all be given to Himself : and, from our past experience, let us be encouraged to rely upon Him in every succeeding season of darkness and distress. He has often manifested the same gracious concern for the support and enlargement of His church in modern times : and we may cheerfully leave the preservation of it to Him ; for He has said, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it."† We lament that infidelity and profaneness seem to gain ground amongst us ; but, since "The Lord reigneth," we rejoice in the hope that He will vindicate the cause of his Gospel, and raise up instruments for its defence and propagation. Let us inquire, Are we ourselves faithful and diligent in doing the work of God, according to our place and ability ?

* Esth. x. 3.

† Matt. xvi. 18.

Do not some, who ought to be most active, discover a shameful remissness? "Because iniquity abounds, the love of many waxes cold." Others evidently care for none of these things, being solicitous only to procure sensual gratifications, or worldly conveniences. These, indeed, are not persecutors, but they are not friends, of Christianity. Nay, their very indifference betrays a sovereign contempt of it; and accordingly our Lord ranks them among his enemies.*

But, from the history before us, we may derive instruction and encouragement for all the sincere members of the church. Marvel not, if you belong to this society, that there are those who seek your ruin. Is it strange, that, as in old times, "he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now?"† Or, why should ye be dejected in your troubles, as if the promise would fail? The cases of ancient saints should teach you to expect deliverance, even when you see no probable way. Only wait in faith and prayer, and the final issue will be safe and glorious. Though you should go down to the grave under contempt and oppression, still your salvation is sure through our Lord Jesus Christ, who will put all your enemies under your feet for ever.—Nor is this consolation applicable only to the strongest believers; for He pays a regard, a peculiarly tender regard, to the weakest of his people; and exercises as minute and affectionate a care towards each one

* Matt. xii. 30.

† Gal. iv. 29.

as if that one comprised the whole. He has obtained the victory for himself, and ensured it to all his faithful followers. Whatever, then, be your present difficulties, it becomes you to rejoice and sing, in expectation of your future triumph. Take up your words, and say, "In all these things we are more than conquerors, through Him that loved us."*

* Rom. viii, 37.

CONCLUSION.

CHAP. XXII.

*Scripture Characters, chiefly confined to the saints—
an illustrious company—exhibit true religion—
show the efficacy of divine grace—testify of Christ
—display the excellence of faith—exhort us to run
the spiritual race—laying aside every weight, es-
pecially the besetting sin—to maintain patience, and
to look unto Jesus.*

OUR short account of the principal histories in the Old Testament has exhibited the characters of some presumptuous sinners: such were Cain, Pharaoh, Balaam, Saul, Ahab, and Belshazzar. But our attention has been chiefly turned towards the saints of God, “the excellent of the earth,” “redeemed from amongst men;” who were the means of continuing the church, of supporting religion in the world, and gradually opening the way for the appearance of the great Redeemer. Here, then, we make a solemn pause; and, in order to fix a deeper impression on our minds in favour of true piety, we once more direct our regard to persons of the latter description.

The ancient “fathers, where are they? and the prophets, do they live for ever?”* They have passed in succession before us: and we observe, that, when they

* Zech. i, 5.

had severally acted their parts, they retired, and gave place to others. Having quitted the earth, they have now entered on a more glorious state of existence, and “received the end of their faith,” amidst the numerous society of “the spirits of just men made perfect.” Their condition is unalterably determined: but does not ours yet appear in suspense? Do we in any measure resemble them? Or have we any just ground of hope and expectation that we shall attain the same blessed inheritance? They were useful in their day, their light shone around them: they were all as so many witnesses for God, while they lived, bearing testimony to His truth, and teaching men by their examples and instructions the nature and necessity of unfeigned and fervent devotion. Even now also, “being dead, they yet speak” to us. O, let their voice be heard, and their exhortations complied with! They may be considered as looking on all the followers of the Lamb, and encouraging them to “endure to the end.” They can tell us how excellent is the service in which we are engaged; how faithful and gracious the Master whom we are called to obey; how sufficient the support which he will administer under all our trials; how sure and glorious the recompense which He will finally bestow. This is the representation of an inspired writer; this the application which he makes of **SCRIPTURE CHARACTERS**. After recounting the achievements of the ancient worthies, he thus closes the subject. “Wherefore, seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily

beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith.”*

While we are struggling with many and severe difficulties in the ways of God, the cases of those, who have trodden the road before us, may afford us some relief and consolation. We may be dejected, perhaps, on account of the small number of those who fear God; but, if we extend our view to past ages, and consider what an illustrious company of this very description, from righteous Abel to the coming of Jesus Christ, have finished their course honourably, and “entered into the joy of their Lord,” we shall find that we are far from being singular, and that our conduct is sufficiently justified, our hopes confirmed, by the examples of a large and most excellent society. “We are compassed about with a great cloud of witnesses.”

Let us examine their testimony. It will be allowed that they exhibit a pattern of true religion, and show us “what manner of persons we ought to be in all holy conversation and godliness:” for in each of them we discover something to be admired and imitated. Did they manfully resist temptation, and dare to differ from their respective generations in principle and practice, thereby incurring contempt and opposition? They teach us that we must “come out and be separate” from sinners; and that it were vain to look for the friendship of the world, if we would be the friends of God. Were they attentive to the worship, and zea-

* Heb. xii. 1, 2.

lously concerned for the glory of God, exerting all their influence to bring others to the knowledge and the love of Him? We should conclude that it is equally incumbent upon us to possess the same pious affections towards God and man, the same courage and perseverance in promoting real godliness. While we perceive their stedfast reliance on the Redeemer, their lively expectations through the divine covenant, and their exemplary conduct, we learn the necessity, and admire the beautiful connexion and harmony, of those three leading graces, faith, hope, and charity, in all the heirs of heaven.

We shall scarcely be called to any place or circumstances, but we may discover in one or other of them a direction for our behaviour, a pattern for our imitation. Are we doubtful how we ought to act? Let us ask, not, What is the practice or the wish of the world around us? but, What would Noah, Abraham, Moses, Samuel, David, or Daniel, have done in a similar situation? We need not be afraid of following such precedents as these. Are we tempted to betray the cause of Christ, and turn apostates, that we may not suffer persecution? Let us inquire, Which of the saints of old would have recommended or taken such a step? Or, if ungodly men would persuade us that there is nothing in religion worth contending for, let us consult former generations; and the lives and deaths of many, whose characters we have contemplated, will sufficiently prove its truth, its importance, and unspeakable value. Though it may almost be laughed out of countenance among ourselves, we dare

pronounce, from their united testimony, that it is not a fraud, a mere fancy, or delusion, but a solid reality, which will support and comfort the soul in deepest distresses, and procure an ample recompense to all its faithful votaries. Let us possess the grace for which they were conspicuous, and we also shall bear witness that all the precepts and appointments of our God are right and excellent, that he delighteth in the prosperity of his servants, and that his ways are ways of pleasantness and peace.

Their high attainments may seem to exalt them so far above us as to forbid all our hopes of imitation. But, should we inquire of them, "Who made you to differ from others?" they would all reply, "In us, that is, in our flesh, dwelt no good thing; neither have we any thing that we did not receive: for the Lord alone hath wrought all our works in us." And will not such a declaration suggest the strongest encouragement? For now we perceive in them what the grace of God enables his people to do. When we view the faith of Abraham, the meekness of Moses, the patience of Job, the ardent devotion of David, the unshaken courage and integrity of Daniel and his three companions, who "jeopardied their lives unto the death," we do not merely admire the excellence of the men, but we praise God, "who makes his strength perfect in weakness;" and we are led to pray that He would "work in us both to will and to do, and fulfil in us, all the good pleasure of his goodness."

Do you plead your utter inability to copy their example? We refer you to Him, "whose grace is suf-

ficient for you," and assure you that " His hand is not shortened, that it cannot save ; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear."* But, if you remain proud, malicious, vindictive, covetous, or intemperate, " are ye not carnal, and walk as men ?"† The knowledge of the Saviour would subdue in you these evil affections ; and his Spirit would render you, as it did the ancient saints, humble, patient, devout, and heavenly-minded. For the fruit thereof " is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance."‡

Should we examine further into the testimony of these witnesses, they would all agree in declaring the infinite value of Christ, and the efficacy of a firm reliance upon Him. We need not inquire with what degree of clearness they understood the great plan of salvation, or compare the different revelations delivered to the church in the different ages of the world. Suffice it to say, that they were divinely instructed to look forwards to the appearance of a glorious Personage as the Redeemer of sinners ; and to fix their whole dependence on Him. The Gospel, therefore, was preached to them, as well as to us ; and the Lord Jesus Christ was the grand object of their desire, as he should be of ours. To him our first parent Adam directed his regard, when he received the original promise of " the seed of the woman."§ Righteous Abel trusted in Him, when he offered an excellent sacrifice by faith.|| " Abraham rejoiced to see His day ; and he

* 2 Cor. xii. 9. Isa. lix. 1. † 1 Cor. iii. 3. ‡ Gal. v. 22, 23.
§ Gen. iii. 15. || Heb. xi. 4.

saw it, and was glad."* Moses wrote and prophesied much concerning Him, as "the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth."† David, throughout his Psalms, "testified the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow;" and with his dying breath sang his praise, while he exulted in "the everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure."‡ Jeremiah proclaimed his name as "The Lord our righteousness;" and Daniel also declared that "Messiah the Prince should be cut off, to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness."§

We need not add more. "Many prophets and righteous men desired to see those things which we see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which we hear, and have not heard them."||—"They received not the promise," in the full completion: "God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect."¶ Would they not, then, exhort us, "Prize your opportunities, and be thankful that the clear light of the Gospel shines upon you? O, consider the excellency and the worth of the Saviour, who is evidently set forth crucified among you! See that ye refuse him not. While he comes to bless you, let every heart be open to receive him; for he is the chiefest among ten thousand, and altogether lovely. Look unto Him, and be ye saved,

* John viii. 56. † Luke xxiv. 27. John v. 46. Rom. x. 4.

‡ Luke xxiv. 44. 1 Pet. i. 11. 2 Sam. xxiii. 1—5.

§ Jer. xxiii. 6. Dan. ix. 24—26. || Matt. xiii. 47.

¶ Heb. xi. 39, 40.

all the ends of the earth. Else, how shall you escape, if you neglect so great salvation?"

What regard do we pay to their testimony? Do we desire, as they did, to look into the great mystery of godliness? Alas! is it not generally slighted or despised? Many will not seriously examine it, but turn away from it with disgust, and reproach those as fools and enthusiasts who seem to be properly affected by it, and concerned for its advancement. Let us, however, be wise for ourselves, and "know the time of our visitation," lest these ancient witnesses rise up in judgment to condemn us.

They exhibit an indubitable proof of the advantage and powerful effects of believing in the Saviour. Faith constituted the most distinguished part of their character; and to this principle we are taught to ascribe their eminent attainments in holiness, and usefulness in the world. We appeal to the short abstract of their history, in the eleventh chapter of the epistle to the Hebrews, as a full confutation of the prevailing notion, that faith relaxes moral obligations, and leads to licentiousness. There we see, not only that a reliance upon the promises of God is pleasing to Him, and procures all spiritual blessings, but also that it regulates the tempers of the mind, and the general conduct of the life, so as to incline and enable men to perform the most arduous duties, in contempt of the severest sufferings. We are assured that "by it the elders obtained a good report."* With an inflexible perseverance they resisted all enticements to evil,

* Heb. xi. 2.

and defied the menaces of their strongest enemies ; because they believed God, and could trust themselves in his hands, depending on his engagements in the covenant.

Many warm advocates for the doctrines of revelation, possibly, may be inattentive to works of righteousness. But the reason is, they possess not the principle to which they pretend. What was Abel, Enoch, Noah, Daniel, and Job ? Were they not exemplary patterns of practical religion ? and yet by faith alone they attained this eminence. Would you follow their steps ? Seek to bring your hearts under the influence of God's truth. Receive and credit his word, as they did, and you will manifest all the graces of the Christian character ; you will gain the victory over your spiritual adversaries, and triumph against the world, the flesh, and the devil. But unbelief would keep you under the bondage of corruption ; for with such a temper of mind you would be enslaved, if not to gross sensuality, yet to secret pride, which is equally detestable ; and sin, in one shape or another, would retain its dominion over you.

What conclusion, then, do we draw from the attestation of these witnesses ? We cannot be at a loss for the application. If They were so much in earnest, let none of Us trifle. If they had such a regard to the interest of religion, we ought not to be ashamed of it. If they possessed so devout and cordial an esteem for Christ, when his grace and glory were obscured under the types and shadows of the law, with what admiration, love, gratitude, and obedience, should we look up to

him, since the true light of the Gospel now shineth with all the brightness of the meridian sun ! May we not add, with the Apostle, " Let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith ?"

We are called to a contest, as were the saints of old. This may be fitly compared to a race, in which many persons are engaged, and all aim at the same prize. The diligence and ardour, necessary for those who vie with each other in running, are equally so for those who would save their souls, and gain an admission into heaven. Every nerve must be strained, the whole man exerted, and the reward, ensured to each successful competitor, will be glorious indeed ; not a corruptible crown, but an incorruptible. This is a matter of universal concern. " The race is set before us." The contest is proposed to us all ; and the path is marked out, in which we must proceed ; nor are we at liberty to choose another. We must likewise observe the rules, which are minutely prescribed : for " no man is crowned, except he strive lawfully." Come, then, give in your names, and enter the lists ; encouraged by those worthy characters, who have gone before, who have finished their course with joy, and obtained the victory.

For this end, you must " lay aside every weight," cast off the things which are most dear and profitable, if they would delay your progress. Those, who are oppressed with a heavy burden, cannot move with speedy steps ; for they are prevented from making the ne-

cessary efforts. And thus many are obstructed in the Christian race by the cares and vanities of the world, the pleasures or the pride of life. Are you candidates for Heaven? Will you not, then, part with that, whatever it may be, which proves an hinderance to you? Or will you not inquire what has impeded or retarded you? To what shall we ascribe your slow advancement? Are you not retaining, or desiring, forbidden enjoyments, going after covetousness, or foolish amusements? and are not your affections divided between things temporal and things eternal? Would you "so run that you may obtain," you must "forget those things which are behind, and reach forth unto those things which are before, and press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."* But, while you loiter, time passes away; the day of grace is expiring; the season allotted for exertion will soon be closed; and, when the night cometh, the contest will be finally decided, and no more renewed for ever.

Sin, then, of every kind, must be immediately renounced: but there is one sin particularly dangerous. It is that "which doth so easily beset us;" to which we are most inclined, and by which we are most frequently overcome. This may be different in different persons: the constitution of your bodies, the natural tempers of your minds, your situations, connexions, and employments in life, expose you to various snares. So the characters we have delineated are marked with peculiar failings: in some we have seen a tendency to

* Phil. iii. 13, 14.

pride or covetousness, in others to cowardice or unbelief. You will readily discover your own weakness; and there especially you must set and continue your watch. Do not spare your favourite, your bosom lusts; nor retain your right hand, or right eye, if they offend you :* but be resolute, be determined to put them from you, though by a painful operation, rather than come short of the prize. Would you say, This is a small fault? So it may appear to you; but you are unfair judges, and you should be reminded that many have perished for ever, in consequence of what they have accounted trivial faults. Not to mention that one transgression leads the way to another and a greater, we observe, that if there be a sin more necessary to be abandoned than all the rest, it is that "which most easily besets you:" because it is continually near you, soliciting indulgence; it assaults and baffles you before you perceive the attack; and therefore it will most effectually prevent your advancement, if not accelerate your destruction.

In your spiritual course you are also required to "run with patience;" which implies that many and severe difficulties must be expected and endured. From the very comparison of a race, it must be concluded that strenuous exertions are to be made; and it would be folly to object to Christianity on this account. Yet do you not "faint in your minds, being wearied" and discouraged by the various trials which you meet with? You complain of inward temptations and outward opposition, the corruptions of your nature,

* Matt. v. 29, 30.

the unkindness and treachery of friends, the frowns of the world, disappointments and losses in trade, and the suggestions of your grand adversary the devil, and you seem to wonder, "as if some strange thing had happened unto you." You forget "that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren," and that you cannot enter the kingdom any otherwise than "through much tribulation."* Look at the generations of old : were not the faithful servants of God in every age oppressed with similar or greater troubles? Yet they persevered in a calm and peaceful expectation of a glorious recompense. "Take, my brethren, the prophets who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction and of patience. Behold, we count them happy which endure."† Then renew the contest with fresh vigour ; or, though "faint, yet pursue." For, consider the terrible consequences, if you relinquish the race, and draw back : shame, confusion, torment, and despair, will be your portion for ever.

One further direction is added to all those who are competitors for the heavenly prize : "Look unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of your faith." This is so important, that the observance of all other rules, however excellent, would avail nothing without it. You cannot hold on your way, unless you receive continual supplies of strength ; and such supplies are to be obtained only by an application to the Saviour. While, therefore, you feel and lament your weakness, lift up your eyes to Him. You are ready to stumble and to

* 1 Peter v. 9. Acts xiv. 22. † James v. 10, 11.

fall ; but he reacheth forth his hand to support and invigorate your souls. " He giveth power to the faint ; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. —They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength ; they shall mount up with wings as eagles ; they shall run and not be weary ; and they shall walk and not faint."*

You must "look unto Jesus" also for your entire acceptance with God, as well as for ability to persevere. You cannot demand an admission into heaven, on the ground of merit, for your own fidelity and diligence ; but you may implore and expect forgiveness, peace, and eternal life, through the atoning sacrifice and prevailing intercession of your great High-Priest. "The crown of righteousness," to which you aspire, is the purchase of his blood, the gift of his love.

But while you depend upon his righteousness for your whole salvation, you are to pay a continual regard to his example. Many illustrious characters have been set before you : but the grand Pattern of all excellence and perfection yet remains to be exhibited. He, indeed, infinitely surpasses and eclipses the rest. If the others be as stars in the firmament, this glorious Luminary even exceeds the sun in its brightness. Fix your eyes on Him, till you partake of his splendour. "Look unto Him," to observe the steps in which He trod ; for as he was in this world, so must you be : and you are to be followers of the saints, only so far as they were of Christ. †

* Isa. xl, 29—31.

† 1 Cor. xi. 1,

“ He is the Author and Finisher of our faith.” He has instituted the race, and invited you to the contest. He has pointed out the way ; He also will encourage and strengthen you, throughout the course ; He waits at the end to receive you ; He will then publicly declare his approbation of you before men and angels, “ Well done, good and faithful servants ;” and with his own hands He will put upon you the crown of unfading glory.

O, what acclamations of gratitude and love to Jesus will resound from all the church triumphant ! Patriarchs, Prophets, Apostles, and Martyrs, as well as inferior saints, will acknowledge, to the praise of his rich and sovereign mercy, “ He was the Author and the Finisher of our faith : to him we are indebted for the beginning, the progress, and the completion, of his grace in our souls.” They will bow with supreme adoration before him, and say, “ Thou hast redeemed us to God by thy blood, out of every kindred and tongue, and people, and nation ; and hast made us unto our God kings and priests. Therefore, blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever !” * Amen.

* Rev. v. 9, 10, 13.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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