

Monergism



IMPROVEMENT OF
AFFLICTION

JAMES BUCHANAN

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Improvement of Affliction

by James Buchanan

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Introduction

"This is my comfort in my affliction — for Your Word has given me life." Psalm 119:50

"I would affectionately recommend this book to every Christian mourner, who desires to drink deeply of the refreshing streams which the Fountain of all Comfort — the Word of God, supplies; for it is from this sacred source the pious and talented author of this excellent work derives 'Comfort in Affliction,' which his pages so eloquently and attractively set forth." *Hugh White*

"To those who are acquainted with the high character for personal piety, theological attainments, and professional usefulness of the excellent author of these Meditations, it may be enough to state, that they are in every way worthy of that distinguished Christian Minister." *Presbyterian Review*.

"We have not read any work on the subject which equals it either in the substantial matter which it brings before the afflicted for their consolation, or in the variety of its details. Were we desirous, indeed, that *Affliction* should be properly understood and improved — we could not recommend any book so well adapted for both purposes as this. We earnestly hope that it will soon find its way into every Christian family." *Scottish Guardian*.

"We do not at this moment indeed remember any single work in which the deeply interesting subject of *Affliction* is considered in a greater variety of lights, and in all, is illustrated with so much vigor of judgment and felicity of expression." *Christian Instructor*.

"The utmost simplicity, combined with exquisite beauty and elegance of composition, the most natural and obvious — yet full and comprehensive views of revealed truth, characterize the volume." *Church of Scotland Magazine*.

Consideration

"In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity
CONSIDER: God has made the one as well as the other."
Ecclesiastes 7:14

There is a beautiful harmony between the *Word* and the *Providence* of God. When Providence *smiles*, the Word allows us to be joyful — when Providence *frowns*, the Word calls us to serious thoughtfulness. The scope and strain of God's revealed will, accord with the natural tendency and apparent design of His dispensations towards us. He neither requires us to rejoice in what is evil — nor to grieve for what is good. It is true, we are taught as Christians, to deny ourselves in the midst of outward prosperity — and to rejoice in the midst of tribulations. But it is only because self-denial in the one case, and joy in the other — are the proper fruits and manifestations of religious principle, and the means of promoting our highest ultimate good.

There is no such thing in the Bible as a disparagement of what is naturally good, or a recommendation of what is naturally evil — except in so far as these are, respectively, injurious or favorable to our true and lasting happiness. We are not required to take bitter for sweet — or sweet for bitter. But as *prosperity*, which is joyful in itself, may become ruinous to our spiritual interests — we are warned against its dangers. While we are taught that *adversity*, however bitter — is the wholesome medicine by which our spiritual health may be restored and preserved.

In a word, the Bible regards each of these states chiefly as it respects their *moral influence* on our hearts. And while it admits that the one

is joyful, and the other painful in itself — it teaches us that each has its peculiar dangers, and proper uses — and that in both we are to have a supreme regard to those great religious principles which alone can render *prosperity* safe, and convert *sorrow* into joy.

We are not to conclude, then, from the antithetic expression of the preacher, either that we may not be joyful in the day of adversity — or considerate in the day of prosperity. On the contrary, we learn both from the lessons and examples of Scripture, that God's people have much reason to be wary and thoughtful while they walk in the sunshine of temporal *prosperity* — and that even in the darkest night of *adversity*, it is alike their privilege and duty to rejoice.

A long season of *uninterrupted prosperity* is accompanied with so many dangers; and productive, in many cases, of so much evil — that the disciple, who really regards the salvation of his soul as the one thing that is needful, will find that a holy seriousness of spirit, and a habit of thoughtful consideration, are essential to the right use and improvement of that condition, and to his preservation from the evils which are incidental to it. While, a season of *uninterrupted adversity*, if it is the blessed means either of commencing or of renewing his communion with God, of implanting, for the first time, in his soul, or of maturing and strengthening the graces of the Christian character — will be an occasion of joy, such as the world can neither give nor take away.

It is not prosperity and adversity, *considered simply in themselves* — but the presence or the absence of religion, in either case, that tells mainly on our present happiness, or on our eternal welfare. Without religion, *prosperity* becomes our ruin. While with religion, *sorrow* is turned into joy. But while this is the light in which these two states are for the most part presented to our view in the Word of God — we are nowhere taught to reverse the dictates of nature so as to regard prosperity in itself as evil; or adversity as in itself good. On the contrary, prosperity is declared to be a proper source of joy, and a strong motive for gratitude. While adversity is described as, for the

present, not joyous but grievous. And accordingly, the duties which are peculiarly appropriate to each, and the exercises which they respectively require, are stated in express terms, and illustrated by beautiful examples. In *prosperity*, a cheerful gratitude, a bountiful charity, and self-denial, devoting all of God's gifts to his glory and the good of our fellow-men. In *adversity*, a resigned and submissive spirit, meek contentment, combined, not with an anxious care — but with a serious thoughtfulness, and a considerate regard of God's dealings towards us, such as may best qualify us for reaping the fruits of affliction, and enjoying religious comforts under its heaviest pressure.

In the day of **ADVERSITY** we are called to serious consideration on many accounts. Without this, we are in danger of allowing God's dispensations towards us to pass away unimproved, and of forfeiting the precious benefits which they are designed to confer. The whole advantage of *affliction* depends on a due Scriptural consideration of it. It does not operate as a charm, nor are its wholesome effects produced otherwise than through the medium of our own thoughtfulness. In all His dispensations God has a regard to our rational nature, and addresses himself to the thinking principle within us. And it is not until that principle has been awakened into lively exercise, and directed to Scriptural views of divine truth — that we can either expect to enjoy solid comfort under affliction — or to be sanctified by means of it. It is only to "those who are exercised thereby," that affliction becomes the means of producing "the peaceable fruits of righteousness." And as on these accounts we are called to serious consideration of the day of adversity, as it offers many important and impressive subjects to our thoughts, some of which we shall now enumerate, with the view of directing you in your private meditations.

1. In the day of adversity, you should consider your adversity itself, not turning your mind away from it, because it is distressing to you, nor allowing your thoughts to dwell on more pleasing topics, with the view of forgetting what has

befallen you; but steadily and of deliberate purpose, looking at your afflictions in all their real magnitude and probable consequences.

This direction may at first sight appear to be unnecessary, as affliction, especially when it is severe, makes itself to be felt, and can hardly fail to command attention. To a certain extent this is true; yet we believe it will be found, that the mind is often unwilling to take a deliberate view of its afflictions; as a man on the eve of bankruptcy is too apt to shut his eyes to the fact of his danger — or as a man smitten with mortal disease is unwilling to be convinced that his recovery is hopeless — and the consequence of this is, that the mind is not suitably impressed by God's dispensations, nor qualified to derive from them the benefit which they might otherwise confer.

The reason why we ask you to *consider* your actual condition, and especially the nature and probable consequences of your affliction, is, that so long as you refuse to *consider* it, or take only a partial view of it — you do not read aright the *lesson* which God has placed before you — a lesson which you cannot understand if you turn your thoughts away from it. And thus it is that worldly men contrive to frustrate the beneficial design of affliction in their own case, and seek to obliterate from the hearts of their friends the impression which it is fitted to produce. They have recourse to business, to society, to change of scene, to frivolous amusements — with the avowed purpose of diverting their thoughts from afflictions which they cannot endure to think of with calm deliberation. And they are ever ready to prescribe to others the only remedy which they have tried for themselves.

But should this advice be offered to any one of Christ's disciples, we beg him to remember that he has a *remedy* provided for him, of which the worldly man knows nothing — a remedy, whose efficacy depends not on affliction being forgotten — but on its being duly considered; a remedy, which so far from requiring a diversion of thought as essential to our comfort — acts through the medium of thought, and makes affliction itself subservient to our good.

The Christian is not precluded, indeed, from availing himself of any benefit that might arise from change of air or scene, viewed simply as a means of relieving him, under God's blessing, from the physical weakness or disease under which he labors. This may even be his duty — a duty involved in the great law of self-preservation, and in attending to it, he may have a supreme view to the glory of God, his own spiritual improvement, and future usefulness in the world. But he is solemnly debarred from seeking relief to his soul by banishing the thought of affliction and death.

Oh! it is a dangerous error, it may be even a fatal error — to act on the supposition that we may lawfully seek relief by forgetting the calamities that have befallen us. These *calamities* are *warnings* addressed to us as rational beings, and, as such, they loudly claim our serious consideration. To have recourse to business, to society, to change of scene, or to frivolous amusement, in such circumstances, is to "despise the chastening of the Lord." It is to do violence to those feelings which affliction naturally produces, and which instinctively point to retirement and reflection as appropriate to our condition. And notwithstanding the favor with which this course is regarded by worldly men, it will be found to be opposed to the common sentiments of society, if it were pursued at those seasons when our sorrows are the most overwhelming.

If a husband were seen in the theater on the evening of that day which witnessed the death or burial of his beloved wife, or child; or if a man smitten with poverty were seen to join in the dance — would not the moral sense of the whole community be offended? And yet if the recipe is good for anything, it should stand us in stead in our greatest extremities. No! *Adversity is a serious thing!* It calls for solemn consideration. It never can be improved nor endured as it ought, unless we *think* of it, and *learn the lesson* which it affords.

View it in whatever light you please; consider it as a *trial* fitted to exercise your minds; or as a *discipline* designed to improve them; or as a *chastisement* for past transgression; or as a *preparation* for

future duty — in every aspect in which it can be contemplated, it claims a thoughtful consideration. And, if this is refused, it will harden the heart, and all the more if it be superseded by the cares and pleasures of the world.

Were no better remedy provided for the afflicted, or were the mind to brood over its sorrows while the remedy is unknown or overlooked — then, indeed, it might be our wisest course to seek diversion in the world. But a remedy has been provided; and the Christian disciple can well afford to look on his affliction in all its magnitude, without incurring the least hazard of troubling the springs of his comfort. If he falls into melancholy or dejection, it is only because he omits someone thing from his consideration which the Bible presses on his attention.

2. In the day of adversity, you should consider from *whose hand* it has been sent to you. It comes direct from the hand of God.

Intermediate agencies may have been employed in inflicting it: a cherished family member may have been the messenger of disease; a treacherous friend may have been the cause of bankruptcy; an avowed enemy may have been the author of reproach and shame; Satan himself may have been allowed to smite you. But through whatever secondary agency it may have been conveyed, adversity comes from God's hand!

"I form the light — and create darkness; I make peace — and create evil. I the Lord, do all these things." Isaiah 45:7

"Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both calamities and good things come?" Lamentations 3:38

"Shall we receive good at the hand of God — and shall we not receive evil?" Job 2:10

"Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the LORD?"
Exodus 4:11

"See now that I myself am He! There is no god besides Me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of My hand!" Deuteronomy 32:39

"The LORD brings death and makes alive; He brings down to the grave and raises up. The LORD sends poverty and wealth; He humbles and he exalts." 1 Samuel 2:6-7

"This is what the LORD says: As I have brought all this great calamity on this people . . ." Jeremiah 32:42

"When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it?"
Amos 3:6

"For He wounds, but He also binds up; He injures, but His hands also heal." Job 5:18

From these and many other passages it is plain that temporal affliction is ascribed to God in the Holy Scriptures, and no one who acknowledges God's Providence at all, can fail to believe that the numerous calamities of human life are permitted, appointed, and overruled by the Supreme Governor of the world.

This is a consideration of great practical importance, and should be seriously weighed in the day of adversity.

For *first* of all, it assures us that our afflictions are neither imposed by a fatal necessity, nor produced by the uncertain vicissitudes of chance — but come forth from the hand of one who is infinitely wise and just and good.

Secondly, it is fitted to minister at least a certain degree of comfort, inasmuch as it demonstrates that we have the security of all his

attributes against the infliction of greater or more protracted suffering than is required by the necessities of our case, and the rules of perfect justice and wisdom and love.

Thirdly, it teaches us in many of our afflictions, and those which it is indeed most difficult to bear, to look beyond, and to rise above, the consideration of the mere *human agency* by which they have been inflicted. I refer to such as are brought on us through the malice of our fellow-men, in regard to which we are too apt to alone consider the *secondary agency* through which they fall upon us — instead of steadily contemplating God as addressing to us, through that agency, the warnings and lessons which we need to learn and improve. Thus it is that this class of afflictions — comprising calumny and defamation, extortion, oppression, and such like — are too little improved, and, indeed, seldom fail to produce an exasperation of spirit, diametrically opposed to that submissive temper which other afflictions, recognized as coming more directly from the hand of God, are fitted to produce.

Whereas, did we consider all afflictions, of whatever kind, as emanating from the unerring heart of loving Father — we would find, that even those which the hand or the tongue of man inflicts — are a wholesome discipline, and means of spiritual improvement.

And, finally, did we habitually bear in mind the consideration which I am now pressing on your attention, we should be the more disposed, and the better prepared for inquiring, with becoming earnestness, into the *reasons* which may exist for such dispensations, and the *grand ends* and uses for which they are designed. Let us remember, then, that every affliction, through whatever channel it may flow, comes to us ultimately from God's hand.

3. In the day of adversity, you should consider the *causes* and *occasions* of suffering in general — and especially,

inquire into the causes and occasions of your own affliction at the present time.

As to the *general* cause of all suffering, it is sin, and nothing else than sin. But for this accursed thing, there would be . . .

no affliction in the world,
no painful disease,
no abject poverty,
no hostile violence,
no death,
no damnation.

Sin is the root of bitterness — and no wonder that its fruits are bitter. Rest assured, that God has not allowed so much suffering to prevail in the world from mere indifference to its welfare, or from any disposition to cruelty. No! "God is love" — and your happiness is dearer to him than any other object — his own glory excepted. All suffering is designed to mark his holy displeasure against sin, and to vindicate the honor of that law which God, as the righteous governor of the world, has prescribed for the regulation of our hearts and lives.

When viewed in this light, the sufferings which prevail to such a melancholy extent in the world, are fitted to deepen our conviction of *the odious nature of sin*. For when we reflect, on the one hand, on the infinite love of God, and his delight in the happiness of his creatures — and consider, on the other hand, how that, notwithstanding this love, God has permitted, nay, appointed so many evils to befall us — Oh! are we not sensible that sin, which is the cause of all suffering, must be, in his estimation, a most offensive and loathsome thing!

When a warm-hearted and kind father, who finds his chief delight in the bosom of his family, lifts the rod, and smites his beloved child for no reason? Does not the very warmth of his love, when viewed in connection with the severity of his chastisements, demonstrate that

he abhors the *disobedience* which imposed on him the necessity of doing violence to his own feelings, by inflicting pain on the object of his fondest regards? Just so it is with God.

And his severe but beneficial and needful discipline, is a signal proof and manifestation of the hatred with which he regards transgression, seeing that for a time that displeasure seems to overcome all his delight in human happiness, and his reluctance to the infliction of pain.

But, in the day of adversity, the Christian disciple should not content himself with this *general* view of the cause of all affliction. He should inquire into the *special reasons* that may exist, in his past life, or in the present condition of his own soul — for God's dispensations towards him. He should consider "why the Lord is thus contending with him" — what root of bitterness there is still in his heart, or what cause of offence in his life, which can have called for the providential warnings and chastisements with which he has been visited. And, in short, whether any, and what cause can be assigned for his own personal and peculiar trials.

I am aware that, while all suffering proceeds from one general cause, namely, our inherent and actual sinfulness in the sight of God — yet it does by no means follow, that the special afflictions with which any one of God's people may be visited, can in all cases be ascribed to any particular dereliction of duty, and decay of personal religion; or that we are warranted to regard those who are visited with the severest and most protracted sufferings, as being, on that account, marked out as the greatest sinners. Absolutely not! Affliction is not dealt out in this state of probation on the principles of strict retribution; nor in the case of God's people, although, in some sense, it is still the consequence, is it to be regarded as the penal desert of sin.

God has other ends in view than merely to recall to their remembrance the sins of their past lives. He often sends trials upon them with the view of *preparing them for future duty* — of *fitting*

them for more extensive usefulness — and of promoting, in general, their more rapid progress in the path of sanctification, and their fitness for a speedy translation to glory. Still, even when affliction is viewed in this light, as a preparatory discipline of the soul, it implies and presupposes certain defects in our character, which ought to be supplied — certain remaining corruptions which should be subdued. And, in most cases, the Christian disciple will be at no loss to discover, in his own state and character, many sufficient reasons for God's dispensations towards him.

Now it is of great importance that he should consider these in the day of adversity — that he should ascertain what are the defects of his character, and what are the special reasons of his present affliction, in order that, knowing the plague of his own heart, he may apply himself vigorously, and in right earnest, to the work of his high calling. Let him, in such circumstances, consider whether he may not have been gradually, and almost insensibly, falling from his first love — whether he has not become less spiritual in the ordinary frame of his thoughts and affections — whether he has not become, more than he once was, a stranger at the throne of grace, or more of a formalist in the exercise of prayer — whether he has not been neglecting some duty, or addicted to some self-indulgence, or in one respect or other exhibiting the marks of a decaying piety, or walking as a backslider from the Lord.

And if, on making such an inquiry, he see cause to conclude that it is not now "with him as it was in months past, when the candle of the Lord shone upon him" — Oh! let him acknowledge the seasonableness of God's interposition — his faithfulness in fulfilling his promise of needful discipline — and his own sinfulness in provoking the Lord to anger, even though he is one of his own adopted and forgiven children.

Most assuredly he will feel, unless, indeed, he is one that "turns the grace of God into licentiousness," that *the sins of God's people are in some respects more heinous than those of unregenerate men*, who

have never enjoyed the same privileges, nor made the same professions, nor offered up the same prayers. And feeling how much his sins are aggravated by the consideration of God's love, and his own ingratitude — he will regard God's chastisements as a reason for the deepest humiliation of heart, for unreserved confession of sin, and for earnest prayer — not so much that his *affliction* may be removed, as that the *cause* of it may be taken away.

4. In the day of adversity, you should consider the *design* and *end* of affliction, or the *uses* which it is intended to serve. As it proceeds neither from blind necessity, nor from casual accident — but from the hand of your Omniscient Governor and Judge — so nothing can be more certain than that it is designed for the accomplishment of some great and useful purpose. Now the design of affliction is expressly revealed in the Word of God. He has condescended to explain the reasons of his dealings with you — and it is alike your duty and your privilege to consider and to concur in his declared design.

The general end of affliction, as it is explained in God's Word, is the moral and spiritual improvement of believers — in other words, their progressive sanctification, and their preparation for glory. Oh! how important must the right use of affliction be, if it is intended to terminate in such a result. It stands connected with our everlasting welfare — with all that we can enjoy on earth, and all that we hope for in Heaven.

But more particularly, the day of adversity is intended for our **INSTRUCTION**. The *Lord's rod* has a voice which speaks to us lessons of heavenly wisdom; and, therefore, we are required "to hear the rod, and Him who has appointed it." (Micah 6:9.) "The rod and reproof give wisdom." (Proverbs 29:15.) It presents to our minds many of the same great truths which are declared in Scripture — but which we may have overlooked, or failed rightly to understand — until they were pressed on our attention, and made the matter of our personal experience, in the day of trouble.

Thus, it teaches most impressively, that great Scriptural truth of **the vanity of the world, and its insufficiency as the portion of rational and immortal beings**. This is a truth which might almost be regarded as self-evident; yet it is one which is very slowly and reluctantly admitted by the young disciple, and which can only be effectually impressed on his mind, and unfolded in all its extent, by the experience of disappointment and sorrow.

In the case of unrenewed men, the world is the only portion which is valued — the object of their supreme affections — the source of their highest enjoyments. When the day of adversity arrives, even they are made to feel that the world is a poor and empty thing — "a broken cistern which can hold no water." But so long as they know nothing of a better portion, they are glad to cling to it, notwithstanding all their experience of its worthlessness. If, however, at such a season, they have their attention directed to the better portion that is provided for them in the Gospel, their experience of *the uncertain and unsatisfying nature of all earthly good* is fitted to awaken their desires after that higher happiness, and those *enduring riches*, which belong to the people of God.

And thus many an individual has been brought, by the *discipline of sickness*, and many a family, by *bankruptcy* or *bereavements* — to relinquish the world, and to seek God as their chief good. No new truth has been revealed to them; for they had often read in the Scripture, and heard from the pulpit, of the vanity of the world — but that which was then addressed to their understandings, is now impressed with power on their hearts. Their own experience has confirmed and strengthened the testimony of God.

On the same subject — the day of adversity administers a wholesome lesson, even to God's own people, who, in some prosperous season, are too apt to attempt a compromise between God and the world, and to seek only a part, and that, perhaps, a small one, of their happiness in Him. They are ready, in such circumstances, to "settle on their lees;" and because "their mountain stands strong," or

because "they have had no changes" — they have become more familiar with the world, less conversant with God, and more wedded to temporal enjoyments, than befits the candidates for heavenly glory.

But the day of adversity comes, and dispels at once the fond illusions by which they had been deceived. It reveals the world to their view in its true light, and they awaken as from a dream to the inbred and thorough conviction that all is meaningless and vanity! Poverty, disease, and death are employed, to teach them a lesson which they were slow to understand or believe when they read it in the Bible, or heard it declared from the pulpit, while as yet they had no experience of its truth. And as soon as they are thus thoroughly impressed with this practical conviction, they are prepared to rise above all worldly influences, and to seek with greater earnestness than ever, the enjoyment of God's favor, which is life, and his loving-kindness, which is better than life.

In like manner, **the day of adversity teaches us the great lesson of our entire and constant dependence on God.** But a little while before, we were rejoicing in the midst of prosperity — our health was sound, our business prosperous, our families entire. But the sudden stroke has come which has smitten . . .

our bodies with disease,
our business with bankruptcy,
or our families with death.

And that stroke has come from the Lord's hand!

Oh! in such circumstances, we are impressively taught . . .
that we are absolutely in God's power;
that all that we have is at His sovereign disposal;
that we depend on Him, day by day, continually for . . .
our personal preservation,
our worldly prosperity,

our domestic comfort,
for all, in short, that we desire or love on earth.

It befits us never for one moment to forget our obligations to him "in whom "we now feel more sensibly than we ever felt before, that "we live, and move, and have our being!"

And finally, our experience of present suffering exhibits to us in a most impressive and convincing light, **some of the grand leading principles of God's moral government.** It demonstrates his holy determination that sin shall not pass by unpunished; and makes it as certain as any other fact in human history, that as a sinner, man is exposed to the righteous judgments of God.

These are some of the lessons which adversity, when viewed as a means of moral instruction, is fitted to inculcate and to impress with great practical power on our hearts. And when these lessons are duly considered, and, above all, when they are submissively embraced and acted on — the disciple will learn from his own experience the value of affliction, and admire the wisdom with which God suits his lessons to the most urgent necessities of his soul.

The day of adversity is intended not only for our INSTRUCTION — but also for our **REPROOF.**

It is designed as a chastisement, to rebuke and humble us. The grand design of God both in his Word and Providence is to produce a genuine humility of heart. Many of his most solemn messages to us in the Bible are intended for this purpose — but the evil is, that pride is too apt to resist the application of these passages to ourselves. Nay, the more proud any man is, and the greater his need of being humbled — so much the more averse is he from this faithful application of God's revealed truth to his *own* soul.

But in the day of adversity, the Lord takes the *rod* in his hand, and by singling out an individual or a family for his fatherly chastisement, he makes a *personal application*, as it were, of the truth to that

individual or family, so as to make them feel that they are under his reproof and correction. Then many sins that had been made light of at the time of their occurrence, and which had perhaps escaped altogether from their remembrance, are forcibly recalled and pressed upon their consciences. The *threatened judgments* which, when heard by the ear merely, had failed to awaken their apprehensions — are now realized and felt to be certain as well as solemn, when they are actually suffering under the rod.

God's holiness and justice are now known to be *active* attributes of his nature, as well as *essential* attributes of his nature. And his moral government is felt to be at work in reference to themselves. Thus *pride* is slain, *repentance* awakened, and *humility* produced. God has applied the truth by the agency of the rod! And while they smart under his chastisement, they feel that it reproves them for sin, and that they dare not utter one word of complaint, or offer one plea in their self-justification. Thus God "has humbled them, and proved them, and shown them what was in their hearts."

The day of adversity is designed for our probation and trial. It brings with it peculiar trials, which are fitted to *test* as well as to *exercise* the graces of God's people. Thus Abraham was tried, when he was commanded, apparently in direct opposition to God's covenant promise — to offer up his son Isaac. This was, in every point of view, a sore trial; it brought with it peculiar temptations to unbelief and disobedience, such as had never assailed the patriarch before. But he was strong in faith, giving glory to God — -and his faith and obedience were rendered only the better and more illustrious by means of his trial.

So is it with the people of God, who are the children of faithful Abraham. God visits them with adversity, not merely with the view of *instructing* or *chastising* them — but **for the purpose of trying and exercising their Christian graces.** By means of such trial and exercise, these graces are strengthened and matured. For just as the bodily frame is more fully developed, and grows in vigor by

means of active exertion — so the principles of spiritual life in the soul are improved and perfected by means of discipline — that discipline calling these principles into exercise, and thereby increasing their strength and vigor.

Thus, when a man who has long been weak in faith is visited with adversity — he is laid under a necessity, as it were, of having recourse to God in his straits. He feels that he has no other being on whom he can depend for support or help; and as one consideration after another presents itself to his mind, as to the all-sufficiency and faithfulness and love of his Lord — his faith acquires increasing confidence, and when he is weak he feels that he is strong.

So with the man who, while he lived in the sunshine of earthly prosperity, may have been easily annoyed by trifling inconveniences, and reluctant to submit to them. But when he is visited by a signal and sore affliction, he is compelled, as it were, to recognize God's hand in it, and thus *a holy resignation to the Divine will*, and *a submissive temper*, are exhibited by him in his severest trials, such as he was unable to preserve in former times. These *graces of the Christian character* being called into lively exercise, and thus strengthened and matured.

And oh! if this be the benevolent design, and this the happy effect of affliction, how much reason has he to rejoice that, while his outward man perishes, his inward man is renewed day by day! And who that knows the unspeakable value of those heavenly graces which are thus invigorated and strengthened by affliction — will murmur at the *discipline* by which God seeks to call them into exercise, and to carry them onward to perfection.

The day of adversity is designed as a means of *preparation for the future which lies before us*. This is an interesting aspect of our present trials. We are too prone to take a *retrospective view* of their causes and occasions — while we think little of their *prospective* design and results. But we ought not only to look back

on the *causes* which may have rendered our afflictions necessary — we should also look forward to the events for which they are designed to prepare us.

I believe that affliction is often sent, not so much as a *chastisement for past sins* — but as *a means of preparation for future duty*. And for this end, it is most suitable and efficacious. It is a means of fitting us for future trials.

All the afflictions of life are not sent upon us at once, otherwise we should be in danger of being overwhelmed by them; but one is sent at a time, and this makes way for another, and prepares us for enduring it. The Lord, in his providence, follows the same rule as in his instructions: "He gives line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little; according as the disciples are able to bear it." One affliction, duly improved, prepares us for enduring another, and deriving good from all.

There is *great diversity, indeed, in God's methods of dealing with his different disciples*.

Sometimes, by a sudden stroke, he visits a prosperous disciple with the heaviest calamity at first. And it is not astonishing if, thus unprepared by previous discipline, it should be felt to be almost overwhelming. But then, if such an affliction is at all improved as it should, it must serve, by its very magnitude, to suppress all repining, and to produce a meek and resigned spirit, under the smaller afflictions which may follow it.

In other cases, the smaller trials are sent first, and one follows after another, until the disciple is prepared for enduring the heaviest of all. The mind that is in any measure duly exercised by the former — becomes, as it were, familiar with the principles which administer support and comfort, and is ready to have instant recourse to them, when the latter arrives.

Oh! how mercifully does God deal with his people, in thus *adapting the method of his discipline to their respective circumstances* — sending on one, who might otherwise fail to be awakened to his highest interests, a stroke like a sudden thunderbolt — and on another, whom such a heavy stroke might overwhelm, such preparatory minor trials as initiate him gently in the *school of affliction*.

Some may wonder that we speak of so many successive trials, and of the wisdom of God in making one affliction prepare the way for another — but it is even so in the experience of God's people. Affliction is not one act of chastisement — but a course of beneficial discipline, a series of preparatory trials leading on to the glorious consummation — for it is "through much tribulation that we must enter into the kingdom of God."

Adversity is a means of fitting us for future temptations.

God, whose knowledge extends to all future events, sees that a disciple is before long to be placed in circumstances which will throw strong temptation in his way. And He also, whose knowledge extends to the secrets of the heart, knows that, in the frame of mind which present prosperity has induced, that disciple would be ill qualified to resist these temptations — perhaps prone to yield to them. He must be called off from the world, and brought to his knees, and strengthened inwardly with strength in his soul. But so long as *prosperity* continues, this moral change, so essential to his future safety, is not to be expected.

Therefore, in the exercise of his unfailing love and faithfulness, the Lord takes him into his own hand, and visits him with affliction. The disciple is grieved, no doubt — but he is also humbled, and instructed and strengthened by this discipline — a new and more spiritual frame of feeling is produced — the truths of religion acquire a firmer footing in his mind, and a fuller ascendancy over his heart. And these truths, thus applied to his soul, furnish him with new and stronger motives — so that, when the hour of temptation comes, he is

prepared, through God's grace, to meet it, and his very sorrows are his preservative from sin!

Oh! little do we know from what temptations we have been preserved or delivered by means of such *beneficial discipline*. How little do we know what we might have been, had we had fewer trials!

The Christian disciple, who has been subject to protracted bodily indisposition, may be apt to wonder why he should be for so long a time kept in a condition which apparently hinders or impairs his active usefulness. But perhaps that very disciple had the *seeds of vanity, worldliness, or intemperance* in his heart, which the *constant sunshine of prosperity* would have caused to spring up and ripen — or he was likely to be placed in circumstances which would have tempted him to open sin. How thankful, then, should he be for *God's restraining grace*, even though that grace has operated through the discipline of sorrow — especially if he finds that, during his sickness, his spiritual health has been preserved and increased, while he sees many a prosperous professor, who has fallen before the power of that temptation from which he has been so graciously preserved!

Adversity is a means of preparation for extensive usefulness. That affliction, when it comes upon us either in the shape of bodily illness, or extreme poverty, or blighting calumny, unfits us for the active service of God — is the complaint which is usually made by those who are visited with it in the prime of life. While many an aged disciple, who is completely disabled by his infirmities, is apt to wonder why he is still preserved in life when his usefulness is apparently gone. But he, who considers that *the greatest usefulness consists in glorifying God* — will see at a single glance that there is no ground for such thoughts in either case.

In regard even to present usefulness, and without reference to the future service for which affliction may be preparing them, *they may glorify God as much by patient suffering as by active service*, and

may thus be in the highest degree useful to those who are around them.

The mere consideration of their sufferings may impress many a beneficial lesson on the minds of others, especially of the young; while the active and consistent exercise of their Christian graces, in such circumstances, may afford an example of religion in its *sustaining* power — such as is admirably fitted to commend it to the acceptance of their friends. Thus, even the aged sufferer, disabled as he is from active duty, may be a powerful witness for Christ. And although he has no prospect of being restored to his former sphere of exertion — he is occupying with good and beneficial effect the post which the Lord has assigned to him.

If it is true, as unquestionably it is, that even an old blind beggar is not without his moral use in the world — then how much more certain is it, that the aged and apparently disabled *believer* is, even in his greatest infirmities, a blessing to his family and friends. For how can he be more useful to them, or how could he better glorify God — than by exhibiting, as he does in the hour of his greatest need, the worth and value of that divine religion which comforts him in all his tribulations, and smooths his path to the grave; nay, which enables him to rise above the love of life and the fear of death, and to rejoice with joy unspeakable, and full of glory, and to bear his testimony to the love and faithfulness of his Lord throughout the whole course of his protracted trials! Such a man is not useless. Oh no! Though his limbs are inactive, his memory faded, all his faculties impaired — yet
...

his moral feelings are strong within him,
his faith is firm,
his hope is heavenly,
his heart is full of peace and joy.

And many others feel that the aged sufferer makes a deeper and more beneficial impression on it, than all the learning and eloquence

of the schools.

As an aged believer was accustomed to say, when reduced to extreme poverty, and wholly disabled by a paralytic stroke, "I often seem to myself and others to be a useless burden on the world — but I know and believe that God must have something yet to do by me or in me, otherwise I would not be here." But while the believer, during the time of his affliction, is really occupying a post of usefulness, that season is, in many cases, designed to prepare him for more extensive and successful exertion in God's service hereafter.

While the *aged* believer looks forward to Heaven as his only remaining sphere of service, the *younger* brethren may anticipate a restoration to health, and a course of usefulness on earth. And their present afflictions are designed and fitted to *prepare* them for exerting a higher and more beneficial influence over their fellow-men. This they do by their influence in promoting our personal sanctification; by deepening our impressions of the vanity of the world, and the value of the soul, and the magnitude of eternity; by enlarging our experience of the power of religion, and teaching us its unspeakable importance.

In proportion as affliction serves to promote our personal growth in grace — in the same proportion it prepares us for future usefulness. Our capacity of glorifying God in all the ways of private or public duty depends on the condition of our own souls. If our souls have been improved by the discipline of adversity — our testimony to God and his truth, and our love and care for our fellow-men, will be proportionately more constant and more effectual than before. Thus the apostle refers to his own experience during his manifold afflictions, as having been a means of fitting him more fully for one important part of the Christian ministry. "Blessed be God," says he, "even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulations — that we may be able to comfort them that are in any trouble, by the

comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." (2 Corinthians 1:4.) Everyone can feel the force of these words.

The word of comfort comes with unspeakably greater power from the lips of a suffering Savior, or a sorely tried disciple, than from the lips of one who has never known adversity. And this holds good, not only of the minister of religion — but of every private Christian, and that, in respect to all the departments of Christian usefulness. He is better prepared by means of his experience, as for comforting the afflicted, so also for exhibiting in his own life and conduct the sanctifying and supporting power of religion, for commending it to the consideration of his family and friends; and for making many exertions, and submitting to many sacrifices, to which others, living in uninterrupted prosperity, might be less inclined to submit. In a word, the deeper the impressions are which he has received on his own soul — the better is he prepared both in point of knowledge and zeal, and sympathy, to care for the welfare of others, and to promote it.

The day of adversity is a suitable preparation for the hour of death. That solemn hour must soon arrive. Much inward preparation of heart is needful if we would meet death with calmness, composure, and fortitude. In the day of prosperity, that preparation may be made, if we can succeed in maintaining the ascendancy of divine truth in our minds: for it is the truth of God inwrought, as it were, into the frame and temper of our spirits — and not any external influence merely — which fits the believer for his *last struggle*.

But during prosperity the mind is too prone to yield to worldly influences, and is often reluctant to allow God's truth that full ascendancy which its importance demands, and which is in fact essential to the believer's comfort in the prospect of death. It is by its beneficial influence in breaking the power of worldly enchantments, in disengaging the mind from delusive expectations, and in directing it more earnestly and simply to the truths of God's Word — that

adversity serves to prepare it for meeting death with fortitude. The sorrows of life may thus, without exciting one feeling of discontent, or calling forth a single murmur — predispose the soul to leave without reluctance, a scene of so much trial — and to anticipate without alarm that solemn event which will terminate all our earthly cares, and introduce us into a nobler and happier state of being.

Prosperity is less suitable than adversity as a means of preparation for death, not because the latter possesses any "magical charm" by which the fear or the pain of death is allayed — but because affliction is in God's hand a powerful instrument in awakening our attention to the truths of religion, and impressing them on our hearts. It is not adversity in itself simply — but adversity duly considered and improved, that has this effect.

Many a sorely tried and afflicted man is as reluctant to die as the most prosperous worldling. But the reason is that, in his case, adversity has failed in leading him to open his mind to the full influence of Gospel truth; and his experience, while it shows that affliction, like other means of grace, may be frustrated of its beneficial tendency — affords no ground for concluding that it has no such tendency.

The genuine disciple is all the better prepared for his last hour by the many seasons of affliction through which he has passed — because, at every such season . . .

his mind has been powerfully impressed,
his contrition deepened,
his faith strengthened,
his communion with God restored,
his love for the Savior increased,
his experience of the Spirit's supporting grace enlarged,
and his hope of Heaven revived.

Thus enlightened, quickened, and comforted by the truths of God seasonably and powerfully applied to his heart by means of affliction — he is prepared to surrender himself into God's hands, and to trust in His unfailing love and faithfulness, at that last, that solemn hour, when leaving its earthly tenement, his soul must enter into the spiritual and eternal world!

The day of adversity is a means of preparation for eternal glory. "For our light and momentary afflictions are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." 2 Corinthians 4:17-18

So says the apostle in words which demonstrate the connection which exists between the believer's sufferings on earth — and his ultimate happiness in Heaven. That such a connection between these two things exists, a connection similar, in some respects, to that which existed between the *humiliation* and *exaltation* of the Savior himself; and that our present afflictions are working out for us a result so glorious — may well serve at once to reconcile us to them, and to impress us with a sense of the wisdom and love of God in imposing them.

But let us not imagine that afflictions have this efficacy in themselves, as if (*ex opere operato*) they automatically either secured or merited for us a future compensation or reward. Far from it! God does not visit us with afflictions beyond our desert — so as to make himself our debtor. Neither does any amount of affliction insure us of future glory, except in so far as it is made the means, in God's hand, of bringing the truth home to our hearts, and inducing us cordially to embrace and diligently to improve it.

And hence the apostle not only states the fact that affliction works out for God's people an exceeding weight of glory — but he points out the way in which it does so: "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is

unseen is eternal." It is by its influence in weaning our thoughts and affections from the world, and directing them to spiritual and eternal things — that adversity tends to prepare us for glory.

We may suffer much and long — but not until the mind looks upward to God and forward to eternity — not until it cordially receives and embraces the truth of the Gospel, is it thereby better prepared for glory — any more than are the fallen spirits who are kept in chains of darkness unto the day of judgment. But as soon as it brings us to the knowledge and reception of the truth, it prepares us by the truth for glory. It then elevates our minds, and prepares and refines them, "so as to make them fit for the inheritance of the saints in light."

This it does . . .

partly by convincing us of the vanity of the world — so as to feel that God alone can be our satisfying and everlasting portion;
partly, by convincing us of the wretchedness of our condition as sinners — so as to feel that peace with God is essential to our happiness;
partly, by convincing us of the remaining corruptions that cleave to us — so as to feel that we must be made perfectly holy before we can expect exemption from trial;
and still more, by enabling us to experience the love of God, the pleasure of comfortable communion with Him, and the unspeakable blessedness of resting on Christ — so as to enjoy some foretaste of that higher and more perfect happiness which shall be enjoyed when we enter into his immediate presence.

Accordingly, we read in the Scriptures that even the redeemed in Heaven look back on their earthly trials with grateful ascription of praise to God for his wisdom and love in making them subservient to their present glory; and a venerable Christian emphatically observes, "I believe there are very few in Heaven — but owe their conversion or their continuance in that state, to some affliction or other."

Such is a brief account of **God's benevolent design in the afflictive dispensations of his providence.** Their general end is the progressive sanctification and ultimate perfection of our natures. And with this view, they are intended for our instruction, for our reproof, for our trial, and for our preparation for death and glory. That such is their declared purpose and use, may well serve to impress us with a sense of God's goodness, even when he chastens us. While their admirable fitness, as a means to so great an end, is illustrative of the Divine wisdom which presides over the management of our affairs. And the serious consideration of the grand design which they are so well fitted to accomplish, is not only useful in reconciling us to the patient endurance of our present discipline — but is also necessary to the right improvement of our present discipline — since, if we are either ignorant or forgetful of God's design in them, it is not to be expected that we shall either bear them with patience, or steadily pursue those grand moral results to which they tend.

5. In the day of adversity, you should consider your remaining comforts, your numerous and undeserved mercies, and your ample and efficient means of relief.

Under the pressure of some sore trial, the mind is too apt to fall into a morbid state, and to brood over its peculiar misery — while it is forgetful alike of the mercies which might alleviate its bitterness, and of the means by which all that is really evil in it might be removed. In some cases there is a reckless desperation — in other cases there is a desponding melancholy, which prevents the enjoyment of any blessing after one favorite object has been withdrawn; and which indisposes, and in part disqualifies, the sufferer from having recourse to those means of relief and consolation which are yet within his reach. This is an ungrateful and rebellious, as well as wretched state of mind.

And hence the apostle rebukes it when he speaks of the two contrasted negatives, "Despise not the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when you are rebuked of him." If we would avoid the latter of

these extremes, and rise above our sorrow, or at least be able calmly to endure it — we must turn our thoughts to the consideration of our remaining mercies, and have recourse to the practical use of those means of relief which God has graciously given. Notwithstanding the severe stroke by which we have been deprived of health, or fortune, or friends — we are still surrounded with innumerable mercies, which are far, far beyond our deserts. Have we not still some earthly comforts — some small supply for our needs, however apparently casual — some sight and taste of the sweet beauties of nature, which are free to all — some few surviving friends who cling the more closely to us in proportion as their number is diminished, and who are still ready to weep with us when we weep, and to rejoice in our joy?

Yet suppose our condition to be the most desolate and forlorn, have we not still the almighty providence of God to trust in, and his precious promises to refresh and gladden us? Have we not still in Heaven a Great High Priest, a fellow-sufferer enthroned amidst the glories of the upper sanctuary, who has a fellow-feeling with us in our trials, and the power of supporting or relieving us in them all? Have we not still, as his disciples, the same grounds of everlasting hope, the same assurance of pardon and peace, the same interest in his great salvation? Have we not still the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, whose very office connects him with the afflicted, and makes them the object of his peculiar care? Have we not the sweet fellowship of our fellow-disciples, who can speak a word of comfort to us from their own experience, and bear us on their hearts at the throne of grace? And have we not access for ourselves to the mercy-seat, where, in the confidence of believing prayer, we may utter the fullness of our hearts in the presence of the God of all comfort?

Oh! let not these precious, these unspeakably sweet and glorious privileges forgotten or despised — merely because some affliction has befallen us! We have still far more left to us, than has yet been taken from us. We have everything we *really need* to bless us in time, and prepare us for eternity.

But let us not merely *think* of these things, let us seek to *enjoy* them. It may be, that affliction has been sent chiefly to restore us to the fuller enjoyment of that happiness which such privileges may confer — to teach us their unspeakable value, and by means of them, to raise us to a higher plane of spiritual life than any we had formerly experienced.

Let us not only consider our remaining temporal mercies — but with a grateful heart partake of them, rejoicing in the light and heat, the air, the verdant earth and starry sky, exclaiming, "My Father made them all!" Let us not only consider God's providence — but with lowly reverence adore and trust in it! Let us feed upon his promises by faith, looking forward with heavenly hope to their glorious consummation. Let us have recourse to Christ as a sympathizing friend, receiving his salvation freely, as it is freely offered, rejoicing in his unchangeable love, glorifying his transcendent work of salvation, and exulting in his exaltation. Let us yield to the Spirit's grace, seeking his guidance, submitting to his power, and rejoicing in his consolations. Let us cleave to our Bible, which contains our glorious charter and security for time and eternity — nourishing our souls with divine truth, refreshing them with divine promises, invigorating and strengthening them with the faith and patience of the saints. Let us more frankly enter into Christian fellowship with our fellow-disciples, learning from their experience, and deriving from their communion new light, and love and joy. And with them, or by ourselves, let us repair often and freely to that throne of grace, before which all the sorrows of believers in all ages have been divulged, not doubting, that to us, as to them — relief and support will be sent in every hour of need. And finally, let us not confine our consideration to the circumstances of our *present* condition — but while we gratefully enjoy our remaining mercies, and dutifully improve our present privileges, let us also consider, and seek in the exercise of holy meditation to realize our *future prospects and hopes*. These might well support us, *even though all earthly supports were removed*.

We know that all our afflictions are soon to terminate, and, if we are Christ's disciples — the end of affliction will be the beginning of perfect joy. Heaven is before us. Thence let us draw, as it were by anticipation, some *foretastes* of its blessedness — motives to encourage, and strength to animate us in our earthly pilgrimage, and an undying energy of perseverance in our spiritual welfare. For why should any Christian faint by the way — if that *way* is leading him to Heaven?

6. In the day of adversity, you should consider Christ Jesus the Lord, as the forerunner and the pattern of his believing people. Thus writes the apostle: "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. *Consider him* who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." Hebrews 12:2-3

Christ should be much in our thoughts in the time of suffering. Let us consider the **number** and **intensity** of Christ's sufferings, and how far they exceed whatever we can be called to endure. Consider . .

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the lowliness of his birth,
the labor of his youth,
the poverty of his whole life,
the persecutions to which he was exposed,
the calumnies which were invented against his character,
the hatred of his avowed enemies,
the treachery of some of his professed friends,
the public insults and mockery with which he was treated,
the pains which he endured of hunger and thirst,
the still deeper pains of crucifixion, and
the deepest pains of all — his "soul-sufferings" which made him exclaim, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death!" "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!"

It is related of an eminent man that, while racked by severe suffering, he was accustomed to turn his thoughts to the scene of his Savior's agony, and that he thence derived at once a lesson of meek endurance and a motive to gratitude — he felt that his sufferings were as nothing, when compared with those of his Divine Master. This seems to be the idea that is suggested by the apostle when he reminds the disciples — that they had not yet, like their crucified Lord, "Resisted unto blood, striving against sin."

Let us consider the **DESIGN** and **EFFECT** of Christ's sufferings. They were different in these respects from our own. In his case they were strictly penal — intended as a satisfaction to divine justice for all the sins of his people; as a fulfillment of the curse of the law; and as such, their amount must have been inconceivably greater than *our light afflictions*, while their effect was and is to deprive all our afflictions of their bitterness, and death itself of its sting.

Our afflictions are *chastisements*, and as such, may be properly regarded as manifestations of God's fatherly displeasure — but they are not *penal* inflictions, such as can satisfy divine justice. No, all that was strictly penal in suffering, all that was required for the vindication of God's law and the fulfillment of the curse — Christ has already endured for us. This consideration is fitted at once to impress us with the conviction that our sufferings have been *alleviated* by the Savior's agony, and to cheer us with the hope that by the effect of his sufferings and death — we shall soon be delivered from their pressure and raised to perfect joy.

Let us consider the **divine sympathy** which Christ's personal sufferings secure for each of his suffering people. A suffering Savior, can sympathize with an afflicted people. "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." "Because he

himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted."

And let us consider the **patience** with which he endured his sufferings — his meek resignation to the divine will — his calmness in the midst of human enmity — his fortitude in the hour of death. "He suffered, leaving us an example that we should walk in his steps." "When they hurled their insults at him — he did not retaliate; when he suffered — he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly."

The apostle's expression, "fixing our eyes on Jesus," is a comprehensive description of what should be in all circumstances — the habit of the believer's soul. But never is "fixing our eyes on Jesus" more *needful* or more *refreshing* than when he is placed in circumstances of affliction. Then, if ever, he should be looking unto Jesus — never losing sight of his once crucified, but now exalted Master, nor turning his eye away from his glorious person — until, by the view of his patience and success in the hour of trial, his heart is at once *subdued into tenderness and elevated by joyful hope*.

One view of Christ, will avail more for our relief in such circumstances than all other considerations combined. A suffering Christ is at once the *Savior*, the *friend*, and the *pattern* of the suffering Christian. And, when He is thus contemplated by the *eye of faith*, virtue will come out of him for the support and comfort of his redeemed people.

In vain is our attention directed to all other subjects — if Christ is *overlooked* or *misunderstood*. We may and should consider . . .

the adversities which befall us,
the hand from which they proceed,
the causes which have occasioned,
the guilt which has incurred them,

the declared design and end of affliction, and
the serious and beneficial lessons which it is fitted to teach.

But all this will not avail for our comfort and support — unless we know and consider "Christ and him crucified." This is . . .

the grand subject of contemplation,
the only genuine spring of comfort,
the only safe ground of confidence and hope.

If afflictions do not lead us to consider Christ in his sufferings, and to know the end and object for which his sufferings were endured, and their intimate connection with our own welfare in time, and happiness in eternity — our afflictions, however numerous, or heavy, or protracted, have been sent in vain! For all the lessons which they teach, respecting the vanity of the world, and the demerit of sin, and the justice of God — are useful chiefly in a way of subservience to our progress in the knowledge of Christ! It is by their influence in leading us to Christ, and fixing our regards on Him as our only help and hope — that they conduce at once to our personal comfort and our progressive sanctification.

Let the sufferer reflect on his trials, and his sins; let him ponder the proofs of God's judicial administration until he is impressed with a solemn sense of his justice; let him consider the vanity of the world, the certainty of death, and his own weakness to avert any one of the calamities to which he is exposed — all these considerations are beneficial ONLY in so far as they have a tendency to convince him of his need of Christ. But he must look to Christ himself, and especially to Christ in his agony, and on the cross — and that, too, with an intelligent and scriptural apprehension of the nature and extent of his sufferings, as an atonement for sin — before he can experience either the sanctifying influence of affliction, or the sweetness of Gospel consolation under it.

He who, either through ignorance or error, thinks little of Christ, or misunderstands the mysteries of his humiliation and death — is yet in a condition which prevents him from being either duly *humbled*, or duly *supported* in the day of trial.

Oh! why will the weak and stricken spirit turn its thoughts to other objects — while Christ, the Son of God, is plainly exhibited to his view, as a fellow-sufferer on earth. Surely such a Sufferer claims his regard, and exhibits to him an *example* such as may cheer, and animate, and direct him, in his most trying hour. Surely it is "the cross of Christ" alone, "by which the world can be crucified unto us, and we unto the world!" And we may well "count all things but loss, for the excellency of the knowledge of Jesus Christ our Lord."

7. In the day of adversity, you should consider the recorded examples of the saints and martyrs who have gone before you, and who, in similar trials, have been enabled to endure, as seeing God, who is invisible. "Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy!" James 5:10-11

A very large part of the historical Scriptures is occupied with the sufferings of God's people, and their experience and conduct under them. *Our first parents*, who suffered in their persons, and were driven forth from the beautiful garden, to a world that was laid under the curse; and who suffered severely in their domestic relations, especially when their first-born imbrued his hands in his brother's blood — *Abel* himself a sufferer and a martyr. *Noah*, the witness of that terrible deluge, which swept away all but his own immediate relatives. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses and David; Isaiah and Jeremiah; the martyred Baptist, and Stephen, the first Christian confessor; Paul, and all the apostles and primitive disciples — all these are exhibited as *sufferers*, whose experience verified the

statement, that it is through great tribulation that we must enter the kingdom.

It is a proof of God's supreme wisdom, that the history of suffering is thus interwoven, as it were, with the whole texture of his Word — since thus it is adapted to whatever has been, and ever will be, the experience of his people in all ages of the Church. Did the Bible speak little of affliction — did it exhibit the believers of olden times as prosperous men, enjoying a happy life on earth, with few or insignificant trials — we might have envied their happy lot, without imitating their virtues, or aiming at their comforts. But when it presents them to our view as men compassed with the same infirmities, exposed to the same trials, enduring the like afflictions with ourselves — we feel that they are our brethren in sorrow — and that like as they were comforted and enabled to endure — so may we also be supported by the same grace, and endued with the same patience from on high.

This it is which imparts a charm to the simple narrative of their experience, such as renders these passages among the most precious portions of the Word of God — insomuch, that it may with truth be said, that *the afflictions of David*, which occasioned the composition of the Psalms, have been a signal benefit to the universal Church of God — every member of which, in all ages and lands, can enter with all the interest of a fellow-feeling into . . .

those mournful complaints,
those pathetic expressions of a stricken heart,
those deep and profound acknowledgments of man's sin and
God's eternal justice,
those earnest breathings,
those longing aspirations towards Heaven
— with which these Psalms abound.

And more generally, the consideration of the sufferings of God's people in all ages, is of the highest use in discharging the mind of

that fond misconception which is so apt to be entertained in the hour of sorrow, even that our sufferings are of a *different* kind, or more *intense* in their degree, than those of other men, "I am the man who has seen affliction by the rod of his wrath!" From which we are too apt to infer that God would not thus deal with us, if we belonged to the number of his people, or unless he had an unappeasable anger against us. Whereas, when we consider the Scripture narrative, we find that *affliction has been the badge of God's people in all ages*, and is to be regarded, not as a mark of reprobation, so much as a pledge of friendship. There we are taught that "fiery as our trial may be, no strange thing has happened unto us" — that "the same afflictions were and have been accomplished in our brethren in all ages of the world" — and that we are only the partakers of those trials, which, as being appropriate to our high and heavenly calling, are described as "the afflictions of the Gospel" — nay, as "Christ's sufferings."

The consideration of *the sufferings of God's people* is fitted farther to assure us, that the Gospel is adequate to sustain us under the severest trials, and in the prospect of death itself. For . . .

they passed "through a great fight of afflictions," and yet received no damage;

they were burned in the furnace, and were thereby not destroyed — but refined;

they submitted to violent death, and the Gospel was adequate to their support and triumph in that fearful hour.

Why then should *we* despond — *we*, to whom . . .
the same promises are addressed,
the same supports offered,
and the same hopes insured!

Will not Christ be with us in the furnace, even as he was with the Hebrew children who came forth from the furnace unhurt?

And finally, *their example in suffering affliction with patience*, is at once instructive and animating. When we consider Christ Jesus the Lord, we are too apt to think that *his divine strength* enabled him to endure in such a way as cannot be realized by his weak followers. But here are men, men with hearts as sensitive, with flesh as weak as our own — who have meekly suffered every form of natural evil, and who have been made more than conquerors over all! Let us consider them in the hour of our trial, and in the exercise of the same unshaken faith in God. Let us seek, like them, to "let patience have its perfect work, that we may be perfect and entire, lacking nothing."

8. In the day of adversity, you should consider the actual effect which your trials have yet produced on your own souls. We have seen what God's design in them is — let us inquire whether that design has been fulfilled in our own souls. Does our experience correspond with his declared purpose.

Are we more sanctified?

Are we more weaned from the world?

Are we more humbled under a sense of our unworthiness?

Are we more deeply impressed by Divine truth?

Are we induced to pray more frequently and more fervently?

Are we more thoroughly devoted in heart and life to God's service — by means of, and in consequence of, our afflictions?

If we cannot answer these questions in the affirmative, have we no reason to fear that we are fighting against God; that we are slighting his warnings, despising his rod, and frustrating his gracious intentions towards us? Oh! it is very needful thus to inquire as to the *actual effect of affliction on ourselves* — for it operates very differently, according as it is well or ill improved.

In the former case, affliction produces . . .

contrition of heart,
deadness to the world,
meek submission to God,
an earnest desire after communion with him,
a holy frame and heavenly temper, such as befits our condition
as pilgrims and strangers on the earth!

Affliction prepares us . . .

for usefulness in life,
for peace in death, and
for glory in Heaven!

But in the other case, when it is despised, or misimproved, affliction leaves the soul as lifeless as it found it: instead of contrition, it awakens discontent; instead of Christian humility, it leaves us in unbelieving despondency; instead of weaning us from the world, it rivets more firmly around us the remaining ties by which we cleave to it, and issues in dull insensibility, or reckless unconcern.

It has been beautifully said, that "*the same fire which melts the gold — hardens the clay.*" Just so, the same afflictions which softened the heart of David — hardened the heart of Pharaoh into more obdurate impenitency. And is it not worth our while to consider *which of these processes* is now going on in our own experience — whether we are becoming better or worse by the discipline of God's providence; whether we are ripening for Heaven — or sinking towards Hell.

Oh! that is a solemn statement which declares, "that he who being often reprov'd, and hardens his neck — shall speedily be cut off, and that without remedy!"

If, on the other hand, we have good ground for believing that our minds have yielded to the beneficial influences of affliction, and have thereby become more dead to the world and more alive to God; if we feel a growing humility of heart, and experience a sweeter communion with Heaven; if our faith has been strengthened, and our hope confirmed in the hour of trial — then may we not only rest assured that it has been *good* for us that we were afflicted; but on a comparison of the spiritual benefit which we have acquired with the temporal prosperity which we have lost — we shall be able and willing to give our joyful and grateful testimony at once to the wisdom and goodness of God in *all* his dispensations towards us.

Having suggested various topics as suitable subjects for your consideration in the day of adversity — permit me again to remind you that all the benefits of affliction depend on your attention being awakened and directed to God's truth. It is by *consideration alone* that it can do you good. *An inconsiderate sufferer — will be an unsanctified sufferer.* He may suffer much and suffer long — but all to no purpose, unless he is brought to *think*, and to think seriously.

That affliction is fitted to induce *thoughtfulness*, is the reason why it is employed as a means in the discipline of God's providence. But its tendency may be frustrated, and then all its benefits must be forfeited and lost.

And finally, let me impress it on your hearts, that you should thus improve the first moments of affliction before yet it be too late. For while the season of adversity furnishes a fit opportunity, and addresses to you an impressive call to consider your case — it ought never to be forgotten, that when affliction reaches its extreme point, it does, in many cases, unfit the soul for all profitable thought. You may be subjected to a disease which will totally overpower your faculties, and give you over as a passive and unresisting prey to the power of death. Think not, then, of postponing consideration until a *future* hour; but laying to heart the trials which you have already experienced, seek so to improve them now, while reason is yet clear

and strong — as that, whatever may befall you hereafter, you may have good ground to rejoice in the assurance that your soul is safe for eternity!

Faith

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in Me." John 14:1

These words form part of the heart-affecting discourse which our blessed Lord addressed to his disciples when he had now the near prospect of being separated from them, and of being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Knowing that "their hearts would be troubled," he prescribes an infallible antidote — and that antidote is faith. For all trouble of mind, faith in God and Christ, is the sovereign cure.

You are aware that the word here translated "believe," is sometimes employed to denote the assent which is yielded to the truths of religion, and sometimes to denote the *trust* or *confidence* which is reposed in God or Christ. The former is the first in the order of nature — a believing apprehension of the truth being the ground and warrant of that trust which is its proper and immediate effect. But although they admit of being *distinguished*, they cannot be *separated* from one another, and are generally combined in the same state of mind. It matters little which of the two ideas we attach to the word, provided always that the *belief of the truth* be such as is accompanied or followed by *trust in God himself*; and, provided also, that this trust in God is the fruit of correct and Scriptural apprehensions of the truth respecting Him.

The grand general doctrine which we learn from the passage is: **That faith in God, and faith in Jesus Christ, is at once the**

sovereign comfort, and the immediate duty of all his people in the time of trouble.

I. Faith in God ought unquestionably to be to all intelligent creatures, a source of comfort. To every mind that has not been disordered in its noblest faculties — the idea of such a Being must be an elevating and consoling one. And as *dark* as is the human understanding, and *disordered* as are its noblest powers — we cannot fail to acknowledge that the existence, the perfections, the providence, and the government of God, ought to minister comfort and satisfaction to our hearts.

Let us form a distinct conception of God as a Being infinite, eternal, and unchangeable; self-existent, omnipresent, omniscient. Let us add to these, His natural and unchangeable perfections, the attributes of holiness, justice, goodness, and truth — which are the special elements of his moral character. Conceive of such a Being, as actually existing, as seated on the throne of this vast universe, and exercising a most provident care over all its provinces. Conceive of Him governing by his sole will, and controlling by his divine perfections — every order of created beings, and every factor of all events. Conceive of Him as extending the same care alike to the seraphs which worship around his throne, and to the sparrows that fall to the earth. Let any human mind, however darkened and debased, take in that one simple, but grand conception — and he cannot fail to acknowledge that, however for other causes it may fail in imparting real comfort — it ought at least, and is fitted to do so.

Were there no reason, arising out of our present state and character, for our being afraid of such a being — could we calmly and dispassionately contemplate all his divine perfections, and reflect on
...

his constant presence with us;
his perfect knowledge of our circumstances;
his benevolent interest in our welfare;

and his power to help and support us
— then assuredly our faith in God would minister comfort in every time of trouble. Our believing apprehension of these momentous truths would produce and sustain a habitual trust and confidence in him.

If, in our present condition, we cannot, from our own experience, speak of the sustaining power of this great truth, let us endeavor to aid our conceptions of it by considering the feelings which it must awaken in the bosoms of perfectly holy and happy beings. Let us conceive of the angels in the upper sanctuary, who have seen the Lord's glory, who have a clear and certain knowledge of his character, and whose daily employment brings them into immediate converse with him — and can we fail to acknowledge that to such holy spirits — the existence, the perfections, the providence, and the government of God, must afford materials for the profoundest admiration, and that God must be their chief joy? Their hearts are not troubled, just because they believe in God.

But take the alternative supposition — suppose that they had lost all knowledge of his divine perfections, and all faith in his being and providence. Suppose, if that were possible, that they should come to live, as too many on earth do live, without God. Oh! what a change would then be wrought in all their views and feelings! What a dreary desolation would spread over the face of the universe which heretofore had been supported by the *power*, and regulated by the *wisdom*, and gladdened by the *smile* of the presiding Deity! With God disappearing from their view — the moral world would become dark and cold, just as the natural world changes its whole aspect on the disappearance of the sun. The light and joy of their immortal life would depart, and they would fall into the very same state of doubt, and misery, and hopelessness, in which men have involved themselves in this fallen and sin-ruined world.

Their case may help us to conceive aright of our own. For in so far as we resemble them in point of intelligence, and in the capacity of

knowing and believing in God — in the same proportion we ought to derive comfort and satisfaction from the consideration of his being and perfections. And although many of us may have had but little experience of the actual *influence* of this faith — none can fail to see that a realizing and habitual belief in God is in its own nature fitted to sustain, and cheer, and elevate the soul.

Is there one man on the surface of this earth to whom it is a matter of perfect indifference whether there is a God or not? There are many, alas! who seldom or never think on the subject of God! There are many more who content themselves with very vague and indistinct notions respecting him. But when they do think upon it so as to form any correct notion at all, all men must feel in their inmost souls, that the existence, the character, the providence, and the government of God, are topics of supreme importance, bearing, not only on the duties and responsibilities of life — but also on their present comfort and their eternal welfare.

Although they have had *no experience* of the unspeakable peace which God's people enjoy in seeking his counsel, in leaning on his arm, in committing themselves to the care of his watchful providence, and in walking in the light of his countenance — yet they can and do see that God's existence is the best security for the order of the universe; that his divine perfections ought to be a source of satisfaction; that the protection of his providence is a desirable, and, in times of danger, a most needful defense; and that in the long run, they are and must be a "happy people whose God is the Lord."

Some such convictions and feelings must often have occurred to every reflecting man, especially in those seasons of peril or of trial, when he was most sensible of his own weakness, and of his dependence on a *higher power*. At such seasons, when the heart is troubled by the apprehension of danger which no human power can avert, or by the pressure of anxiety respecting the dark and uncertain outcome of events which have an important bearing on our welfare — but which no human forethought can regulate or control —

everyone must be sensible that a firm belief in Almighty God, and in his presiding providence, can alone sustain the mind, and ought to be sufficient for that end. Yet, that he should be regarded by all intelligent creatures as the fountain of joy and blessedness — as their refuge and defense, their surest support, and their sweetest portion — is not more certain than is the fact, that, in the actual experience of mankind in their fallen state, he is the object of their fear, distrust, and jealousy.

Insomuch that while his existence, and providence, and infinite moral perfections are generally admitted — these considerations, so far from relieving their minds from sorrow, are felt to be the occasions of deep depression or alarming fears! The idea of God, when it does occur to the unsaved mind, is often fraught with terror. Many a man might say with the Psalmist, "I remembered God and was troubled! I complained, and my spirit was overwhelmed. I am so troubled that I cannot speak!" And with Job, "Therefore am I troubled at his presence, when I consider — I am afraid of him, for God makes my heart faint, and the Almighty troubles me." "For the arrows of the Almighty are within me, the poison whereof drinks up my spirit! The terrors of God do set themselves in array against me."

Our Lord says to *his disciples*, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God" — plainly representing *faith in God as an antidote or remedy for trouble of mind*. Yet Job and the Psalmist, and many of God's tried and afflicted people, as well as multitudes of the ungodly, have been troubled mainly by the remembrance of God.

Why is this? Is it because faith in God is not *naturally* fitted to minister comfort and joy — let the experience of unfallen angels answer the question. They will testify that all their felicity depends on him who is thus a terror to sinful men. Is it, then, the result of an unenlightened superstition — is it a blind and groundless fear? By no means. Great and majestic, and gracious as is the character of God — yet both Scripture and conscience concur in testifying that he is a just Governor and Judge. So being conscious of our sinfulness, we cannot

regard God, in that character, without many misgivings and fears. We must feel, if we think at all, that he may have grounds of accusation against us, and reasons for manifesting his holy displeasure.

These suggestions of conscience are amply confirmed by our present experience, seeing that God's judgments are so numerous and so severe. In these circumstances, it is not astonishing that our belief in God should fail to relieve our hearts of trouble, so long as we consider him only as he stands revealed in the light of nature. Nay, the more profound and the more correct our knowledge of God becomes — the more reason shall we discover, for admiring indeed the excellency and the greatness of his character — but, at the same time also, for apprehending the certainty of his displeasure on account of sin. Thus all the comfort which innocent and holy beings might derive from the contemplation of his divine perfections — may, in the case of fallen and sinful creatures, be superseded by a fearful apprehension of his wrath and curse.

When our Lord says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in Me" — he plainly intimates that a believing knowledge of the truth respecting himself must be added to our faith in God, in order that we may be delivered from mental trouble.

And this is necessary, first, Because in its own nature faith in Christ is fitted to relieve the mind of its most depressing anxieties and cares. And secondly, Because it is the means of qualifying us for enjoying that full peace and comfort which faith in God ought to impart.

In its own nature, faith in Christ is fitted to relieve the mind of its most depressing anxieties and cares. This faith has reference to all those grand truths which stand connected with the method of *redemption*. It apprehends the meaning and acquiesces in the certainty of such statements as these — that "Christ came into the world to save sinners!" That "he came to seek and to save the lost!"

That he is "the Mediator between God and man," "The atoning sacrifice for our sins," "The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" That "he died, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us unto God," that "he was wounded for our transgressions, and bruised for our iniquities, that the chastisement of our peace was laid upon him, and that by his stripes we are healed," that "he has redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us," that in consequence of his vicarious obedience and sufferings, whereby the law was magnified and made honorable — God is now "the *just* God and the Savior," that in token of his approbation and acceptance of Christ's work, "God raised him from the dead," and has "exalted him as a Prince and Savior, to give repentance and the remission of sins," and that now, "whoever believes in him shall not perish — but shall have eternal life!"

These are *some of the truths which faith in Christ necessarily involves*, and when these truths are correctly understood and sincerely acquiesced in — they produce a habitual trust and confidence in Christ, as an all-sufficient Savior — as a Savior "able to save unto the uttermost all who come unto God by him."

That a believing apprehension of such precious truths, and a personal trust and confidence in such a Savior — should be a remedy for all mental trouble, must be evident to every reflecting mind. But faith in Christ is not only fitted in its own nature to comfort us — it is also the means of bringing us into a new relation towards God, whereby we are qualified for enjoying to the full, all that peace and satisfaction which the consideration of his divine perfections, his almighty providence, and his moral government, is fitted to impart. And this effect of faith in Christ, in enlarging, strengthening, and sweetening our faith in God himself — is well worthy of your serious consideration.

We have already had occasion to observe, that a belief in the existence, perfections, providence, and government of God, apart from the revelation of his character in the Gospel of Christ —

although it ought to minister comfort and joy to all his intelligent creatures — is nevertheless insufficient to remove those anxieties and fears which a sense of *guilt* must awaken in the bosoms of fallen men. That it leaves unresolved, some of the most serious questions which can occur respecting his dispensations towards the guilty, and their prospects under his righteous government.

But if we believe in Christ, all these difficulties, whether relating to his purpose towards us, or our relation towards him, are at once removed. For "God in Christ" is revealed as "reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing unto men their trespasses." *Christ brings us to God, not as an avenging Judge — but as a forgiving Father!* We are reconciled to God by the death of his Son, and enabled to look up to him without one misgiving or fear — nay, with *filial confidence and affection* as our Father in Heaven.

Thus liberated from our fears by the faith of Christ, we may enjoy all the comfort which faith in God can impart. We are no longer under the necessity of overlooking any part of his glorious character, in order to preserve our inward peace. We may dwell with devout admiration on each one of his attributes, even on such of them as heretofore had excited our uneasiness or awakened our fears. We may seek to acquire larger views of their transcendent excellence, in the firm assurance that so far from weakening the grounds of our hope and comfort — they will only strengthen them the more. For now through Christ, every perfection of the Divine nature becomes a new pledge of the believer's safety and peace! His faithfulness, his unfailing truth, his very justice and holiness itself — is a new reason for the believer's joy. It is thus, that *through Christ we come to enjoy and to delight in God himself*, and that the faith of Christ enhances and sweetens that faith in God, which is our *support* in every hour of danger, and our *solace* in every time of sorrow. And thus, we realize the full blessedness which Christ proposes to his disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in Me."

2. While faith in God and Christ is the spring of all spiritual comfort, it is also the *special duty* of the afflicted — a duty to which they are expressly called by God's dispensations, and on the observance of which the sanctified use of affliction mainly depends. The Lord's words direct us to faith, not only as a *spring of comfort* — but also as a *seasonable duty* in the time of trouble. Sometimes by providential afflictions, at other times by spiritual trouble — he teaches us to live a life of faith. In such circumstances, we are made to feel that we have no refuge but in God, and no refuge in God himself but through Jesus Christ the Lord.

The dispensations of his providence, and the spiritual discipline to which we are subjected, are both designed for this end; and if they are suitably improved, we shall be ready to say with the Apostle, "The life which I live in the flesh, is by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me."

That *affliction is both designed and fitted to call us to the exercise of faith* is evident, as well from the general scope of Scripture, as from the experience of every believer. The chief evil of our present condition is, that we are so prone to live under the influence of seen and temporal things, to the neglect of things which are *unseen* and *eternal*. But when affliction comes — when we are either disabled for enjoying, or deprived altogether of the means of earthly happiness — when our sky is overcast with clouds, and our worldly prospects are dark and dismal — we are glad to look above the world, and beyond it, for some better and more enduring portion.

This may not be the immediate effect of every affliction. On the contrary, the sufferer may for a time seek relief from other quarters, as we learn from the case of backsliding Israel, "When Israel saw his sickness, and Judah saw his wound — then Ephraim went to the Assyrian, and sent to king Jareb — yet could he not heal you, nor cure you of your wound." (Hosea 5:13.) But even in regard to them, the same discipline of affliction which had in the first instance failed to produce its full effect, was to be continued as a means of

ultimately reviving their faith in God. "I will go, and return to my place, until they acknowledge their offence and seek my face; in their affliction they will seek me early." (Hosea 5:15.) And accordingly it follows, "Come and let us return unto the Lord, for he has torn, and he will heal us; he has smitten, and he will bind us up." (Hosea 6:1.)

Sometimes affliction is the means of convincing men that they are destitute of true faith, as when a prosperous nominal Christian is suddenly, by severe trials, thrown back for support on those religious principles which he had long professed — but which now, in this the hour of his need, he feels to be too slight and superficial to sustain him.

At other times affliction is the means of invigorating a faith which, under the malignant influence of worldly views and feelings, was ready to die.

And universally, affliction is designed for the trial and exercise of faith, wherein consists a principal part of our moral probation in this state of discipline.

God is often pleased to place his people in circumstances in which . . .

they feel that they are shut up to the exercise of faith;
that they are in a *labyrinth* from which no human wisdom can deliver them;
that they have no outlet by which they can escape, unless God himself clears their way before them;
and that they must *look* to him solely, and *trust* in him simply, and follow the leadings of his providence, as it were, blindfold!

They must *trust God in the darkest hour of providence*, holding fast by the simple word of promise, which is *their only light in a dark place*. When, to the eye of *sense*, all is obscure and gloomy — the *eye of faith* must be their guide. When God's providence is so mysterious that the believer is ready to exclaim, "Your way is in the sea, and your path in the great waters, and your footsteps are not known!" — yet,

recollecting the facts and promises of the Sacred Record, he is able to add, "You lead your people like a flock."

When, like David, "his foot had well-nigh slipped," he is recovered by his faith: "I had fainted unless I had believed to see the goodness of the Lord." And while many transpose these two things, and seek present sensible experience as the ground and support of faith — he does not, in such circumstances, seek to see that he may believe — but he believes to see. His language is, "I will look unto the Lord; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will hear me. Rejoice not against me, O my enemy: when I fall, I shall arise. When I sit in darkness, the Lord shall be a light unto me. I will bear the indignation of the Lord, because I have sinned against him, until he plead my cause, and execute judgment for me. He will bring me forth to the light, and I shall behold his righteousness!"

Wherefore, "Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty — yet I will rejoice in the LORD! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation! The Sovereign LORD is my strength! He makes me as surefooted as a deer, able to tread upon the heights!" Habakkuk 3:17-19

As faith is a seasonable *duty* in the time of trouble — so it is the *means* not only of procuring that comfort which may cheer us under it — but also of fulfilling, in our experience, the grand moral design for which it is sent. As "without faith, it is impossible," in any circumstances, "to please God" — so without faith it is impossible to reap the precious fruits of affliction. It is not the trial of our rational nature, nor the trial of our tempers — but "the trial of our *faith*, which, being much more precious than of gold that perishes, though it be tried with fire, shall be found unto praise, and honor, and glory, at the appearing of Jesus Christ." 1 Peter 1:7

It is only through faith, that *temporal evil* is productive of spiritual good. Disease, bereavement, bankruptcy, cannot sanctify us if we cherish an unbelieving frame of mind. It is God's truth, revealed in the Word, clearly understood by the mind, and firmly apprehended by faith — which exerts a moral influence on the heart, and thus fulfills the design of affliction. "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth!" John 17:17

Is affliction designed to raise our thoughts above the world, and to fix them on God and Heaven? Then it is by faith that this purpose is fulfilled; for "faith is the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen."

Is affliction designed to refine and purify our moral affections? Then it is by faith that this purpose also is fulfilled; for "God purifies our hearts by faith." (Acts 15.9.)

Is affliction designed to break the spell of the world's enchantments, and to raise us to a noble superiority over all its ensnaring pleasures? Then it is by faith that this purpose also is fulfilled, "for this is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith." (1 John 5.5.)

In a word, *the whole moral and spiritual benefit of affliction depends on the exercise of faith.*

The apostle tells us, that "faith is the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen;" and that, "by faith, Moses endured, as seeing him who is invisible." In other words, faith realizes unseen and eternal things; and in proportion as it is exercised, makes the believer to live . . .

as if he saw God beside him;
as if he saw Heaven above, and Hell beneath;
as if he beheld Christ on the cross, or
as if he beheld invisible eternal realities.

Faith . . .

brings a sublime class of objects to bear on the mind;
it widens the range of our vision;
it lifts our eye from the things of time and sense;
it brings us under the powers of the world to come;
it changes our view of everything on earth, by teaching us to
consider them in connection with the things of God.

We now see that we have higher objects of thought, and greater interests at stake, and a loftier destiny before us — than this world affords. And thus, when we have seen, in the light of God's truth, the glory of things unseen and eternal — we are worldlings no longer. Faith has broken the charm by which the world enslaved us, and we begin to feel and to act as subjects of God's universal government, as heirs and expectants of immortality.

But especially is it faith in God and Christ that has this effect. In Christ's cross, we see a monument of the world's vanity — but also a monument of the worth and value of the soul. We see God in human nature suffering for some great design, and that design, once understood, casts every earthly thing into the shade. And just in proportion as we enter into that glorious scheme, which has its origin in Heaven, its execution on earth, and its consummation in eternity — will we feel that our faith is loosening from around us the fetters of the world, and that by Christ's cross, which exhibits the sum and substance of all revealed truth, "the world is crucified unto us, and we unto the world."

Faith changes our view of everything pertaining to this present world, and it enables us especially to look on affliction in a new light. It regards this world as but a scene of preparation for Heaven — and views the events of time in their connection with the destinies of eternity. Having "respect to the recompense of reward," it teaches us not only to submit to self-denying sacrifices, with a view to everlasting happiness — but even deliberately "to choose," as Moses did, "rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season."

Great must be the power of that faith, which has sustained the martyrs and confessors of God's truth in all ages, "who submitted to be tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection; who had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yes, moreover, of bonds and imprisonments; they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, they were tempted, they were slain with the sword; they wandered about in sheep-skins and goat-skins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented; they wandered in deserts and in mountains, in dens and caves of the earth."

And if faith were thus able to resist and overcome all the terrors of persecution, and to quench those fires which it had been the occasion of kindling — should it have less power to sustain us under the more *common afflictions of life*, which come to us in the ordinary course of providence? Or if it was the duty of the martyrs and confessors to exercise an unshaken faith, and to maintain their constancy in the trying and terrible circumstances of their times — can it be that we are guiltless, if, in the more *common tribulations of life*, we cherish an unbelieving and distrustful frame of mind?

Is it not our blessed *privilege*, as well as our clearest *duty*, to exercise
...

- a simple, unwavering, and confiding faith;
- a faith grounded and settled on the word and faithfulness of God;
- a faith embracing the whole substance of his testimony;
- a faith recognizing God in his revealed character as God in Christ;
- a faith trusting in him absolutely, and, without fear, committing everything to his care;
- a faith regarding spiritual things revealed as most certain, solemn, and eternal realities;
- a faith cleaving to the word of promise in the darkest hour;
- a faith realizing our eternal prosperity as its ultimate object;
- a faith producing inward holiness and comfort as its present

fruits, and a pledge and confirmation of our future hopes; a faith viewing every change on earth, and every succession of private or public events — as only a new manifestation of God's sovereign will, and a fresh illustration of that stupendous providence by which, in all ages, and through the most complicated agencies, he is steadily advancing for his people's good — that one grand scheme of grace, which will soon terminate in glory.

In the time of trouble, we are called . . .

to a special exercise of faith in regard to the events of Providence,
to trust his heart — when we can't trace his hand,
to confess the rectitude of his procedure,
to recognize his holy design,
to adore his unsearchable wisdom, and
to acknowledge his loving-kindness in all our trials.

But before illustrating these special exercises of faith, I would earnestly solicit your attention to the important reflection, that you cannot exercise this special faith in God's providence with advantage and comfort — unless you believe in God, and believe also in Jesus Christ. It is the truth revealed in Scripture, and especially the truth respecting God in Christ, that is the *comprehensive object of faith*. And it is by the belief of that truth that you may be prepared for viewing the events of Providence in a scriptural light, and for deriving spiritual benefit from them.

Unless by faith you regard God in his scriptural character,

unless by faith you embrace God's scheme of redemption,
unless by faith you enter into a state of reconciliation with him,
and repose your personal trust and confidence in him as your covenant God,
unless by faith you are united to Christ, so as to have a saving

interest in all the privileges which he purchased, and in all the promises which he has made — you cannot exercise faith in reference to the events of Providence or the afflictions of life. The latter is only a special act or exercise of a general and comprehensive principle, which embraces the whole truth of God, and applies it to all the various exigencies of our condition — in prosperity and adversity, in health and sickness, in life and death.

Special Exercise of Faith in the Wisdom of God's Procedure.

"He led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation" Psalm 107:7

This Psalm is designed to illustrate the universal providence of God — but a special allusion is made to the case of the Israelites in the wilderness, as affording a signal example of the method in which God's providence is exercised for the good of his redeemed people. That God led the Israelites through the wilderness, is elsewhere affirmed, where it is said, "you *led* Jacob like a flock, by the hand of Moses and of Aaron." "He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; he *led* him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye — as an eagle stirs up her nest, flutters over her young, spreads abroad her wings, takes them, bears them on her wings; so the Lord did lead him." (Deuteronomy 32:10-12.)

A visible sign of his presence in the midst of them was graciously given to strengthen their faith in his promise. "The Lord went before

them by day in a pillar of cloud, to *lead* them in the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light." (Exodus 13:21.)

And although, when provoked by their ingratitude and rebellion, he threatened that "he would not go up in the midst of them lest he should consume them in the way;" (Exodus 33:3) yet, on the intercession of Moses, he was graciously pleased to renew his promise, saying, "My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest." (Verse 14.)

Accordingly, every step of their journey was regulated by his counsel. He taught them where to rest, and when to advance. He marked out for them the path which they should take, and at every successive stage they had fresh proof that they were under the immediate guidance and protection of the God of Jacob. When we consider this fact, that God was their *leader* and *guide*, and when we reflect on his *omniscient and unerring wisdom* — but above all, on *his paternal kindness and love* — we cannot fail, from these considerations alone, to conclude, that the way by which they were led, was, as it is said to be in the text, "the *right* way." His love, his wisdom, his foresight, his covenant promise, and his Almighty power — these were so many assurances that he would not lead them astray; that weak and wayward as they were in themselves — their steps should be so ordered as to bring them to their promised rest.

But while God was their leader, and while the way by which he led them was the right way, I beseech you to observe that it was not a way unhindered by difficulties, and temptations, and trials. On the contrary, it was beset with them on every side, insomuch that their progress through the wilderness, so far from resembling the triumphal march of a prosperous nation under a great and glorious leader, was, throughout, the journey of distressed pilgrims; it involved them in many hardships, exposed them to many dangers, and gave occasion to much murmuring and distrust; and yet, still it is affirmed, that "he was leading them by the right way, unto a city of habitations." It may be instructive to compare the actual facts of the

case, as these are recorded by the pen of Moses, with this general declaration from the pen of the Psalmist: to consider the way by which they were led, with all its difficulties and trials, and to connect it with the assurance, that difficult and dangerous as it was, it was the right way.

1. The way by which God led the children of Israel, was neither the shortest nor the most direct. On the contrary, it was circuitous, and, in so far as their mere translation to the land of Canaan was concerned, unnecessarily protracted. Numerous and mixed as the company was under the conduct of Moses, "consisting of six hundred thousand men, besides children, and much cattle," (Exodus 12.37,) a *few weeks* might have sufficed to transfer them from Egypt into Canaan. Yet we read that "when Pharaoh had let the people go, God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; but God led the people about, through the way of the wilderness of the Red Sea." (Exodus 10.17-18.)

And you are well aware, that instead of completing their journey in a few weeks as they might have done, God kept them in the wilderness for the space of forty years!

2. The way by which God led the children of Israel in the wilderness, exposed them to severe privations, cut them off from many of their favorite indulgences, and deprived them of most of their former comforts. Thus we read, that after their departure from Elim, "the whole congregation murmured against Moses and Aaron, and said unto them: Would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh-pots, and when we ate bread to the full! But you have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger!" (Exodus 16:2-3.)

And again at Rephidim, "the people thirsted for water — and the people murmured against Moses and said, Why have brought us up

out of Egypt, to kill us, and our children, and our cattle, with thirst? And Moses cried unto the Lord, saying, What shall I do unto this people, they be almost ready to stone me?" (Exodus 17.3.)

And long afterwards, at Taberah, "the children of Israel wept again and said, Who shall give us meat to eat? We remember the fish which we ate in Egypt freely: the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic. But now our soul is dried away; there is nothing at all, besides this manna, before our eyes." (Numbers 11.4-6.) Their privations, then, were felt to be grievous; but still it is declared, that this was the right way for them.

3. The way by which God led the children of Israel in the wilderness brought them frequently into inextricable labyrinths; into situations of imminent peril, from which they could not have escaped — except by his own miraculous interference. Nor does it appear, either that they could not have reached their destination without passing through these labyrinths, or that they fell into them by mistake or mischance — on the contrary, they were led into them by the express direction of God! Thus, immediately after they had left Egypt, "Then the LORD gave these instructions to Moses: Order the Israelites to turn back and camp by Pi-hahiroth between Migdol and the sea. Camp there along the shore, across from Baal-zephon." (Exodus 14.1.)

This was a situation entirely out of their direct road, and of such a nature, that their escape from it was absolutely impossible, by human means, if they were pursued by the Egyptians — for if assailed in the rear, they were hemmed in on either side by the land, and before them was the sea. And yet they were brought hither by the special direction of God himself, and that too, when the peril of such a situation was so obvious, that it was predicted that "Pharaoh would say of the children of Israel, they are entangled in the land; the wilderness has shut them in!" (Exodus 14.3.)

Nor was this a solitary instance — *many* such situations were chosen for them, in which escape, by human means, was impracticable, insomuch, that the difficulties in which the children of Israel were involved by means of the route which was chosen for them, and the labyrinths into which they were brought, being such, as the most ordinary prudence might have avoided, and such also as no leader would have encountered, unless he acted under the impression that he was divinely directed on the one hand, and would be miraculously delivered on the other hand.

The way, then, was full of difficulties — yet it is said to have been the right way.

4. The way by which God led the children of Israel in the wilderness, exposed them to numerous conflicts with their enemies, conflicts for which so mixed a company were but ill prepared, and which often excited the murmurs of fear and discontent. Thus they were called to contend with *Pharaoh*: "The children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians marched after them, and they were sore afraid; and they said unto Moses: Because there were no graves in Egypt, have you taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you dealt thus with us? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness!" (Exodus 14.10-12.)

Afterwards, they had to contend with *Amalek*; and when they sent some of their number to search the land of Canaan, their report was, "We can't go up against them! They are stronger than we are!" So they spread this bad report about the land among the Israelites: "The land we traveled through and explored will devour anyone who goes to live there. All the people we saw were huge. We even saw giants there, the descendants of Anak. Next to them we felt like grasshoppers, and that's what they thought, too!" (Numbers 13.31-33.)

"Then the whole community began weeping aloud, and they cried all night. Their voices rose in a great chorus of protest against Moses and Aaron. 'If only we had died in Egypt, or even here in the wilderness!' they complained. 'Why is the LORD taking us to this country only to have us die in battle? Our wives and our little ones will be carried off as plunder! Would not it be better for us to return to Egypt?' (Numbers 14.1-3.)

And when Moses and Aaron fell on their faces, and Joshua and Caleb rent their clothes, and entreated them not to rebel against the Lord, "The whole community began to talk about stoning Joshua and Caleb." (Numbers 14.10.) Yet the Lord was leading them by a right way.

5. The way by which the Lord led the children of Israel in the wilderness, was marked by frequent chastisements sent upon them directly from his own hand. He led them — but it was sometimes in a way of *judgment*. He was a father unto them, and they were his children; but for that very reason, he lifted the rod and smote them, when they required correction. As he did not exempt them from the assaults of their enemies, so he did not himself spoil them with over-indulgence, "He visited their iniquities with the rod, and their sins with chastisements." And these chastisements were sent in such a way as to show from *whose hand* they proceeded. Thus at Taberah, "when the people complained, it displeased the Lord, and the Lord heard it, and his anger was kindled; and the fire of the Lord burnt among them, and consumed those who were in the uttermost parts of the camp!" (Numbers 11.1.)

And again, when in answer to their demand for flesh, he sent them quail to eat; "he sent a plague along with it." (Numbers 11.33.) And soon after, their murmurings were answered by God sending among them "fiery serpents which bit them, so that many of them died." (Numbers 21.6; Deuteronomy 1.40.) And in righteous retribution for their rebellion, he declared that the people should not enter Canaan,

until all the men of war of that generation, Joshua and Caleb only excepted, "had been consumed." (Deuteronomy 2.15.)

From a review of these facts, you cannot fail to see that the way by which they were led, was one which, to the *eye of sense*, was far from being inviting or agreeable. It was one which, if they had been left to choose for themselves, they would not have chosen, and which, when they had entered on it, was felt to be so disagreeable to flesh and blood, that we are told, in the simple language of Moses, "the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way." (Numbers 16.4.) Yet by this way the Lord thought it best to lead his people; and we are told by the Psalmist that it was "the right way."

If we now inquire into the reasons of God's procedure in regard to their journey, we shall find that the very difficulties which they encountered were among the most efficient means of preparing them for the high destination which awaited them in the land of promise.

Let us, in the first place, ascertain the *end* which God had in view, and for which he was preparing his chosen people; for on the fitness of the *means* employed, to the *end* which was proposed to be accomplished by them, the rightness of this way depends.

On this point, we must not suppose that God's sole object was to translate them from the land of Egypt into Canaan; this might have been effected by a much shorter and a much easier process — they might have passed as quickly and as safely from Egypt to Canaan, as Jacob with his family in former times had passed from Canaan into Egypt. But, while it was his intention to bring them to a city of habitation, in the land of promise — he had a far higher end in view; even to prepare them for being a peculiar people unto himself — the depositories of the true faith, and the channel of conveying the privileges and promises of the covenant to a remote posterity. For this end the family of Abraham had been selected from among all the families of the earth. And it was a high and distinguished privilege

thus to be chosen of God as a nation of witnesses to his truth, as a nation of partakers in the everlasting covenant. They alone were privileged to know the one living and true God, when all the nations of the earth were sunk in superstition and idolatry. And it was God's purpose to establish his own worship in the land of Canaan, that the knowledge of himself might thereby be preserved in the world, and that a way might thus be opened up for the appearance of his blessed Son in the fullness of times.

This was their high destination, and their long journey through the wilderness was mainly designed to fit and prepare them for it. Had they been translated at once, and with ease, from their bondage in Egypt, into the possession of the promised land — there is sufficient evidence, in their frequent rebellions, their unbelief, their murmurings, and their backslidings in the wilderness, to show, that as yet, they were ill-qualified for so high and holy a destination. Their questioning whether God was in the midst of them or not, even after he had divided the sea before them; their demand that Aaron should make unto them gods to go before them, even at the very foot of Mount Sinai, where God spoke to them with a voice from Heaven; their desperate reluctance to submit to his guidance, and acknowledge his providence, even when it was accompanied with miraculous interposition — these facts, so characteristic of man's fallen nature under every dispensation, show that, as yet, they were neither so fully convinced of the truth, nor so well prepared for being witnesses to it, as it was necessary they should become, if they were to be "a holy nation, a peculiar people, and a royal priesthood" to the one living and only true God.

But their being kept so long in the wilderness, and their being placed, while there, under a dispensation essentially *miraculous* — was a fit and suitable means of impressing on their minds a due sense of the truth respecting God. Every calamity which threatened them, every critical situation in which they were placed, every enemy by whom they were assailed, was made the occasion of a new manifestation of divine power on their behalf. And every such manifestation was

fitted to impress them with the fact that "the Lord he is God, and that besides him there is none else!"

Their whole way in the wilderness, then, is to be regarded, in general, as a way of *preparation*, not so much for their mere possession of the promised land, as for their being God's witnesses and servants there. For thus Moses describes them, "You are a holy people unto the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a special people unto himself, above all the people that are on the face of the earth." (Deuteronomy 7.6.) It is true, that with the exception of Caleb and Joshua, none of the existing adult generation were to enter the land of promise; but they had so multiplied in the wilderness that, after the men capable of bearing arms had been swept away — there was no sensible diminution of their numbers; and their children, less familiarized with the idolatrous notions and practices of Egypt, and brought up from their infancy in the wilderness, under a miraculous dispensation — could not fail to be deeply impressed with the power and greatness of Jehovah. And this new generation, trained in the wilderness during the space of forty years, were to enter the land of Canaan, and form a nation in covenant with the God of their fathers.

God's object being to raise up such a nation as should preserve the truth alive in the world, the fitness of his procedure is not affected by the death of the existing adult race, when their children, better instructed, remained, of whom, as Moses declared to them, all the nations would speak, saying, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people; what nation is there so great, who has God so near unto them, as the Lord our God is, in all things that we call upon him for." Accordingly, it has been remarked by several writers, that the young Israelites, who had received a *wilderness education*, were the most godly and exemplary of all the generations of that people; for "Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua, and which had known all the works of the Lord, that he had done for Israel."

It is an interesting and consoling reflection, that, as in the case of his ancient people, God led them into the *wilderness* with a view to the *discipline* and godly training of their children — so, in the case of his people now, he may have an eye to the future good of the children, when he is visiting their families with distress. But while the whole of their history in the wilderness may be regarded, in general, as a course of preparation for their peculiar destination, several special ends, comprehended in this general design, are mentioned in Scripture, and may be separately noticed — as proofs that, however to the eye of sense, their way in the wilderness might be rough and uninviting, it was in reality *the right way for them*.

1. They were a stiff-necked people, and their way in the wilderness was adapted to their temper, and designed to humble them. It was a course of severe but beneficial discipline. This is declared to be one of God's ends in thus dealing with them: "You shall remember all the way which the Lord your God led you, these forty years, in the wilderness, to *humble* you, and to prove you, and to know what was in your heart." (Deuteronomy 8.2.) And nothing surely, could have been better suited to this end, than that journey, which was a perpetual series of backslidings on their part, and of marvelous mercies and deliverances on the part of God.

2. They were prone to unbelief, as all men naturally are, especially with respect to the sovereignty and providence of the one living and true God; and their way in the wilderness was designed to establish their faith in God's government of the world, and in his special covenant with themselves. Every stage of their journey furnished fresh evidence that the Lord God was in the midst of them. And every relapse on their part into unbelief, was followed either by some signal deliverance, or by some awakening judgment, such as was fitted to rebuke and reclaim them. Thus, when they were in great terror for the Egyptians, and murmured against Moses for exposing them to what they regarded as inevitable destruction — God interposed, and Moses said, "Fear not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord!"

"The Lord shall fight for you, and you shall hold your peace." (Exod. 14.14.) It is added, "The Lord saved Israel that day, out of the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the sea-shore; and Israel saw that great work which the Lord did upon the Egyptians — and the people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord and his servant Moses." (Exod. 14.30-31.)

Even Moses himself was tempted to doubt the word of the Lord, when he promised food in the wilderness; and God said unto him, "Is the Lord's hand waxed short; you shall see now whether my word shall come to pass unto you or not!" And immediately it was fulfilled, in the sight of all Israel, by the descent of *quail* for their food. Thus, at one time by judgments, at another, by signal mercies, the Lord was rebuking their unbelief, and establishing their faith.

3. The way by which God led them in the wilderness was fitted and designed to bring them to a due sense of their absolute dependence on God. The imminent *dangers* to which they were exposed, the *privations* to which they were subjected, the formidable *enemies* by whom they were assailed — these were all suited to convince them that, but for God, they must inevitably perish. And their daily supply of food from Heaven was a daily memento of their absolute dependence upon Him. So that the very trials and perils of the wilderness were the appointed means of fostering a spirit of trust in the living God, and thus of preparing them for being his witnesses and servants in the promised land.

4. Some of the most signal events in their journey were designed to be the means of magnifying the great name of their God in the sight of the heathen; and thus of impressing them with a beneficial awe, so as to prevent them from assailing or resisting the progress of his people. Thus, they were permitted to be hemmed in by the sea — that Pharaoh, being tempted to follow them, might be overthrown. *Pharaoh* will say, they are entangled in the land, the wilderness has shut them in; and "I will be honored upon Pharaoh and all his host,

that the Egyptians may know that I am the Lord." The report of this great calamity spread from the Egyptians to the surrounding nations; insomuch that it went before the Israelites, and the people through whose lands they passed were afraid to encounter them, lest a similar calamity might befall themselves.

Their contest with *Sihon* was made a means of magnifying their God, and of affrighting their enemies. "This day will I begin to put the dread of you, and the fear of you upon the nations that are under the whole Heaven; who shall hear report of you, and shall tremble and be in anguish because of you." (Deuteronomy 2:25.) Thus were the most critical and trying events of their journey through the wilderness, overruled as a means of their safe admission into the land of Canaan, when by God's discipline in the wilderness, they were prepared for entering on their inheritance.

5. Some of their apparent trials in the wilderness, such as their circuitous route, and the delay that was made in putting them in possession of the land of promise — were in fact the fruits of God's merciful consideration for their weakness. And the *murmurs* which they occasioned proceeded from ignorance respecting his gracious design in them. Thus God's wisdom and tenderness appear in the reason which is assigned for his not leading them through the land of the Philistines, though that was near; but leading them about through the wilderness, "lest," says he, "the people repent, when they see war and they return to Egypt." (Exodus 13:17.) They were not at that time prepared to face so formidable an enemy, and, therefore, in kind consideration for their weakness, and with a view to their ultimate good — God led them about by a less direct but more suitable way. Yet the people murmured at being led in this way, not knowing the gracious views which had caused its selection for them.

The same considerate kindness appears in the reason which is assigned for their slow and gradual occupation of the land of Canaan, when they arrived at its borders, "The Lord your God will put out those nations before you little by little: you may not consume them at

once, lest the beasts of the field increase upon you." (Deuteronomy 7.22.)

These are a few, out of many proofs which might be selected, of the wisdom, and care, and kindness with which God led his people through the wilderness. They show, that while the way was circuitous, and rough, and dangerous — yet it was, notwithstanding, or rather on these very accounts, the right way — a way fitted to prepare them for their inheritance in Canaan. It was a way of mingled mercy and judgment, which afforded means of discipline, such as a more direct and less painful course could not have supplied. It was a way marked out by unerring wisdom, and in which they were guided by a Shepherd who never slumbered, by a friend who never forsook them.

And although many times "the soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way," yet when Moses told his father-in-law "all that the Lord had done for Israel's sake, and all the travail that had come upon them by the way, and how the Lord delivered them," (Exodus 18.8,) "Jethro rejoiced for all the goodness which the Lord had done to Israel, and said, Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods!" And subsequently Moses could appeal to the murmuring Israelites themselves, and say, "The Lord your God has blessed you in all the works of your hand. He knows your walking through this great wilderness — these forty years the Lord your God has been with you, you have lacked nothing." (Deuteronomy 2:7.)

Dear brethren, we are now in the wilderness! This poor world is not our rest! We too have heard of a city of habitation, a city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. And many of us, I trust, have been separated from the world and united to that company of pilgrims who have set their faces steadfastly to go up to the Jerusalem above.

There is a striking analogy between the Israelites in the wilderness, on their journey to Canaan — and believers in the world, on their

journey to Heaven. The history of the former, has been recorded mainly for the purpose of guiding and comforting the latter. I am disposed to look on the miraculous dispensation under which the Israelites were conducted to the land of promise, as only a mere striking exhibition of that universal providence which still watches over God's people on earth; and as being singular only in so far as the agency of God, at all times really the same, was then supernaturally visible.

God is our leader, as he was theirs. No pillar of cloud, indeed, goes before us by day — no pillar of fire is visible by night; but he who led Jacob like a flock, is still the "Shepherd of Israel, who neither slumbers nor sleeps." God rules by ordinary means, not less than by supernatural interposition; and his promise is, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." And as God is our leader, so our path through life is as really ordered and directed by him, as was the way of the Israelites in the wilderness. True, we hear no audible voice from Heaven, directing our steps; but God leads us by his providence, shutting us up to a particular line of life, fixing the bounds of our habitation, determining our work, our connections, our success, by a variety of circumstances over which we feel that we have no control, and many of which are apparently trivial — but not one of them are by chance or accidental. And as God is our leader, and as our path in life is prescribed and ordered by him, so, if we belong to the number of his people, we may rest assured that he is leading us by the right way.

Our experience, indeed, may often resemble that of the Israelites in the wilderness. God may seem to lead us in a circuitous and indirect way. We may be, we shall be, subjected to tribulation. We must leave the world behind us, as the Israelites left the flesh pots of Egypt. We must encounter difficulties, and endure the assault of enemies, and sustain trials, such as will humble us and prove us, and show what is in our hearts. Our hearts, too, may be much discouraged because of the way. It may seem a tedious, a dreary, a perplexing way — and, when faith is ready to fail, it may lead us to murmur against the Lord.

All this is true; but the Lord knows the way which we take in this great wilderness; and as sure as God is our guide, so sure is it, that he is leading us by a right way.

All the difficulties,
all the trials,
all the disappointments,
all the bereavements,
all the delays,
all the chastisements
which befall us — are as needful for us, as they were for the children of Israel.

We, too, need to be proved.

We, too, need to be humbled.

We, too, have evil hearts of unbelief which must be subdued.

We, too, must be educated by instruction, and trained by discipline, and purified by suffering — that we may be fitted for our inheritance above.

There is an inheritance for us, as there was for them. Their inheritance in the land of Canaan — was but a type or shadow of our incorruptible, undefiled, unfading inheritance, reserved for us in Heaven.

And seeing that God has opened up such a glorious prospect before us, oh! why should we doubt that he will lead us by a right way on our journey towards it. Or why should we quarrel with any of his appointments here — if they are all designed to fit and prepare us for such a destiny hereafter? Would we take the regulation of our life out of God's hands — and keep it in our own? Would we think it safer and better for us to be guided by our own will — rather than by His unerring wisdom and infinite love? Or, leaving our affairs in his hands — would we desire that his wisdom should yield to our

caprice, and that he should rather consult our wishes than our welfare?

No, our safety is, that we are in God's hands. The Lord is our Shepherd, and we may rest assured, that however perplexing the path may be by which he conducts us — he will lead us like a flock through the wilderness; that while we are in it, goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our life, and that in the end we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. "Fear not, little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." There we shall be able to look back on all the way by which the Lord has led us in the wilderness; we shall then see it to have been "a right way;" and, in admiration and gratitude, we shall acknowledge with Moses, "In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling. Exodus 15:13

Special Exercise of Faith in the Goodness of God's Procedure.

"Whoever is wise, let him heed these things and consider the great love of the LORD." Psalm 107:43

In these words the Psalmist concludes and sums up a review of God's ways in providence. The general doctrine which he inculcates, is, that *a considerate observance of God's dispensations will impress every religious mind with a practical and experimental sense of his loving-kindness.* In the preceding verses of the Psalm he had referred to five distinct cases, which may be regarded as so many illustrative specimens of God's dealings with his people — and in one or other of which every believer may find something that is analogous to his own experience, and that renders the instruction here conveyed applicable and appropriate to his own case. The inference from all the cases described, is, the general doctrine which is inculcated in the text, namely, that *a wise and considerate habit of observing and reflecting on God's ways in providence, will impress the mind with a sense of his loving-kindness; and that, too, notwithstanding the many trials and afflictions which occur in the course of every man's life.* For it is very remarkable, that the providences to which the Psalmist refers are many of them afflictive — he does not seek to disguise or palliate the severity of those trials to which God is pleased to subject us in this world. On the contrary, he brings them all into view, and exposes them in their real magnitude — yet he affirms, notwithstanding, that "whoever is wise and will observe these things — even they shall understand the loving-kindness of the Lord."

1. When the Psalmist, after reviewing the various dispensations of providence, affirms, that "whoever is wise, and will observe these things, even they shall understand the loving-kindness of the Lord," he plainly proceeds on the supposition, that the events of human life

in general, and the facts of every man's own experience in particular — are of such a nature that no one can seriously consider them, without acknowledging that *there is a providence at work in the world, and that this providence is a gracious and a merciful One.*

That there is a divine providence, directing, controlling, and overruling all the events which take place on earth, whether these be of a public or more private nature — is a truth which, however much it may be doubted by the careless, and however boldly it may be denied by the profane — will nevertheless commend itself to the conviction of every considerate mind, which habitually and dispassionately contemplates the events of human life, in connection with the *causes* out of which they spring, and the *results* in which they terminate, or which they have a tendency to promote.

To a careless observer, the course of events may appear to be determined by no fixed principles, and to be regulated by no steady laws — all may seem to be a strange medley of uncertainty, vacillation, and change. But on more attentive observation, the course of events will be found to afford as strong evidence of a constant providence — as the structure of nature affords of a wise and intelligent Creator. It will hardly be denied that a concurrence of events to one great end, especially if these events are numerous and complicated, while, at the same time, they seem to be mutually independent of one another, and to have no other connection, except what arises from the supposition of a supreme will, overruling them all for the accomplishment of its own designs — may afford as striking a proof of God's interposition as is furnished by the construction of a piece of mechanism, or by the arrangement of material elements in any organized body.

When we examine the structure of a plant, or of an animal, or when we consider the formation of any one organ, such as the human eye — we see at once that its parts are so adjusted to one another as to answer an important end. And hence we infer, from the traces of *design* and *wisdom* which are exhibited in its structure, that it could

only be the product of a designing cause — or, in other words, the result of God's creative wisdom and power.

Now, what we affirm, is, that a series of events may be so arranged, as to afford precisely the same evidence of an overruling providence; events, which naturally have no apparent connection with one another — but which, nevertheless, may be strung together so as to have a common bearing on some one result, and so as to demonstrate, by their concurrence to that one end, just as an organized body demonstrates by the fit combination of its parts — the interposition of Divine wisdom and Almighty power.

The argument, in both cases, proceeds on precisely the same principles; but in the one case, these principles are applied to the combinations of *matter* — in the other, to the combinations of *events*. In either instance, there is an end, and a concurrence of means towards that end, which affords ample evidence of design; and the advantage of considering the subject in this light, consists in the evidence which it affords, that the doctrine of a constant and presiding providence rests precisely on the same ground, and should be received with the same unwavering certainty, as the doctrine of God's being itself, in so far as that doctrine is embraced on the strength of those *proofs* which nature furnishes of the *design* and *wisdom* of the Creator of the world.

It is true, that there are many events, of so trivial and insignificant a nature, that we would not think of founding upon them, in any argument for Divine Providence. But it is equally true, that there are many material objects in nature, which, were they considered by themselves, might not afford a sufficient, or at least, a striking evidence of divine creation. When the Theist wishes to establish the latter doctrine, he selects, not an isolated stone, nor a solitary piece of clay — but some organized body, as a specimen of God's work. And in like manner, in establishing the doctrine of a providence, we are at liberty to consider events in their combination and succession, and

to select such combinations as most signally display the tokens of God's design.

These are prerogative instances, in both cases; not that God's *creation* or God's *providence* is less real in the plainer forms of matter or the more trivial events of life — but that they are less strikingly exemplified; and hence, the origin of those views which have often been presented to the world, and as often excepted against, respecting *particular* and *special providences*, which if they be meant to convey the idea of anything miraculous, are unquestionably liable to just exception. But if they are honestly meant merely as striking examples of a providence which is at once universal and minute, are no more to be objected to, than is the common practice of selecting *a striking specimen of design in illustrating the proof of a creation*, or making a striking experiment, in illustrating any of the laws of nature. And for this reason, the Psalmist selects in the present case, several illustrative specimens, and founds on these the doctrine of God's overruling providence.

All the subjects of human observation admit of being arranged under two heads: nature may be considered either as *contemporaneous* or *successive*. The design exhibited in *contemporaneous* nature, proves the existence of *God*. The design exhibited in *successive* nature proves the *providence* of God.

The general doctrine of a providence may be established on these and similar grounds; nor can I conceive it possible to hold, that an act of divine power was necessary for the *creation* of the world, while it is denied that the continued exercise of divine power is needful for its *maintenance* and *support* — or to believe that we could not have acquired our existence but from God, while we arrogantly imagine that we may exist without, or independently, of His will. But I apprehend that in order to realize and appreciate God's providence, we must have recourse to the means suggested by the Psalmist, and instead of looking only to abstract reasonings, apply ourselves to a close and considerate observance of all the methods of God's

dealings with ourselves. We must review all the way by which God has been leading us, and, connecting his dispensations with the declared ends and objects of his moral government, and with our felt necessities — we shall be able to see, each in his own case, innumerable proofs both of the wisdom and care of Him in whom we live, and move, and have our being.

The events of every man's life, when they are thus considered, will afford abundant evidence of a providence, and will impress that great doctrine on the heart with a power which no abstract reasonings can be expected to exercise over the generality of mankind. The man who, on *reviewing the course of his life*, can see no trace of God's providential hand — may as well, on considering the frame of his body, refuse to acknowledge the marks of God's creating hand. And he, on the other hand, who is most minutely attentive to the facts of his own personal experience, will be the most thoroughly penetrated with the conviction, that *there is a providence that upholds all, and overrules all*. But not only will an attentive consideration of the events which befall ourselves or others convince us of the doctrine of God's providence — it will also serve to show that this providence is a *gracious* and a *merciful* one, and that it has been pervaded throughout by a spirit of loving-kindness.

We read, "that God is good unto all, and that his tender mercies are over all his works;" and this is so manifest both from the constitution of nature, and the course of providence, that love or goodness is justly held to be one of the essential attributes of the divine nature. In the original constitution of the world, there is ample evidence of the loving-kindness of the Lord. We see the human frame so nicely adjusted in itself, and so admirably adapted to the elements by which it is surrounded and the circumstances in which it is placed. We see *faculties* bestowed which render us susceptible of happiness. We observe such a harmony between external things and their respective faculties, as betokens at once the wisdom and the kindness which presided over the creation of the world, and which still preside over the course of providence.

There are indeed many evils and much disorder in the world — but these proceeding, as Scripture tells us, from the fall, and capable, as our own experience shows, of being traced more or less directly to the influence of moral evil — cannot affect the general doctrine that God is good. For, as sinful as the world has become, and dark as is the cloud which hangs over it, "God has never left himself without a witness, in that he has done good, and gives refreshing rains, and fruitful seasons, filling the hearts of men with food and gladness," — nay, "making *his sun* to rise, and *his rain* to fall both on the righteous and on the wicked, on the just and on the unjust."

If we admit the idea of a providence at all, how can we refuse to acknowledge the loving-kindness of the Lord, seeing that, on the most general view of the state of the world, *we must perceive his hand lavishing its bounties on all lands* — year after year, producing grain for cattle, and meat for the service of man; diffusing plenty, at least producing a sufficiency, for the countless myriads of our race, "covering the Heaven with clouds, preparing rain for the earth, making grass to grow upon the mountains; giving to the beast his food, and to the young ravens which cry." "Sending the springs into the valleys which run among the hills, giving drink to every beast of the field; watering the hills from his chambers, so that the earth is satisfied with the fruit of his work, and dropping rain on the pastures of the wilderness, so that the little hills rejoice on every side!"

Who can contemplate the order and harmony which reign unbroken, amidst the vast masses and prodigious movements of the skies — the restraints which are imposed on the most boisterous elements — the electric fire — the stormy wind — the raging sea — the regular return and sure gradations of the seasons, and the absolute dependence of our race on all these vast causes, so far removed from under our control, without acknowledging that the Lord is good, and that every day bears witness to his providential care?

But more particularly, each individual may find in his own case some peculiar token of God's kindness to him. It is in the details of each

man's personal history that we find the most touching manifestations of God's providential care. And none of us can, I think, refuse to acknowledge that we have been the objects of a *watchfulness* which has never slumbered, and of a *benevolence* which has never been weary in doing us good. Were we to attempt an enumeration of all the blessings which we have received at God's hand — of all the deliverances which he has wrought out for us — of all the snares from which he has preserved us — and of all the manifestations of his long-suffering patience, and tender mercy, of which we ourselves have been the objects — were we to begin with the years of infancy and helplessness, and to trace our progress through the slippery paths of youth, until we reached our present state — we would soon find how impossible it is to reckon up the sum of our innumerable obligations to "the loving-kindness of the Lord."

For not only has he spared us in life, and upheld us from day to day, by his almighty power; not only has he given us our daily bread, and made our cup to run over, and that, too, notwithstanding all the ingratitude which we have displayed, and the manifold provocations which we have offered; but, in peculiar seasons, in seasons of difficulty and trial — he has often delivered . . .

our *eyes* from tears,
and our *feet* from falling,
and our *souls* from death!

And as often as we have cried to the Lord in our trouble, He has delivered us from our distresses, or supported and comforted us under them. So that each of His people, on a review of God's dealings with him, will be forced to exclaim:

"The Lord has been my shepherd!"

"I have not lacked any good thing!"

"Hitherto has the Lord helped me!"

"The Lord has done all things well!"

"Surely goodness and mercy have followed me all the days of my life!"

"His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness!"

I am well aware that, in the course of every man's life, much will be experienced, which to an irreligious mind may furnish food for discontent, and which, even to God's people, may occasion many a severe trial of their patience and faith. Evil is so strangely *mixed* with good, and affliction so interwoven with mercies in this chequered scene — that the course of providence, if it affords, in some respects, proof of the loving-kindness of the Lord — may be regarded in other respects, as affording an equal proof of his *severity*. And, as the solution of this apparent contradiction is of great practical importance, and can be found only in the principles of our holy religion, I proceed to observe: *That the considerate observance of God's ways in providence, will not only convince us of the loving-kindness of the Lord — but will serve also to disclose to us the true nature of this divine perfection, and to deliver us from many false views which men are apt to entertain respecting it.*

On no subject is there more misapprehension than on this. The goodness of God is often spoken of as if it were a mere instinctive desire for the diffusion of universal happiness, without reference to the characters or habits of his creatures — as if he were concerned to make them comfortable, whatever might be their views and feelings in reference to himself, and in whatever way might be most congenial to their disposition and taste; as if, in fact, God had regard to no other end than the mere physical enjoyment of man!

Now, no view can be more at variance with the doctrine of Scripture than this! I see not how, on such a supposition, we can reconcile the actual facts of human experience, with the belief that an Almighty Being, acting on this principle, exercises a providence over the world. For, unquestionably, *there is much suffering in the world.* And if

there is no moral reason and no final cause for such suffering — it would seem to derogate either from the *goodness* which we ascribe to God, or from his *power* to carry his benevolent intentions into effect.

The man who holds it as a first principle, that the only or the chief end of God is the diffusion of mere physical enjoyment, irrespective of all moral considerations, and who takes a survey of the actual state of the world, or a review of his own experience — must be staggered by many difficulties, which a more correct and Christian view of *God's end in providence* can alone obviate and remove.

The Bible does not speak of God's goodness in this way. *It never once ascribes to him the desire of making his creatures happy without reference to their moral condition.* It declares his loving-kindness, indeed, and tells us that he has no pleasure in our sufferings. But it affirms, notwithstanding, that *these sufferings are inflicted by his hand, and will continue to be inflicted, so long as the more important ends of his government are unfulfilled.* In a word, it is a *moral happiness* — a happiness springing from, and in a great measure consisting in, the graces and virtues of a holy character, that the Bible declares God's willingness to bestow. And it is a moral goodness that is ascribed to him, not an *indiscriminate charity*, that would secure a happiness for every man conformable to his own inclinations, however wicked and perverted these inclinations may be; but a holy love, acting wisely, with a view to moral ends, and seeking to bless its objects in a way suitable to their dignity as moral and responsible beings.

To this end, suffering itself is made subservient; and the deprivation of mere rational and animal enjoyment becomes, in his hands, the means of a far purer and loftier happiness — the happiness of a renewed mind, of a good conscience, and of well-ordered affections.

Hence, in the Christian scheme, there is no contradiction in that seeming paradox, "Blessed are those who mourn," for, by the sadness

of their countenance, God seeks to make the heart better, and then they are blessed indeed. And hence, also, *affliction* itself is a pledge and token of God's love to his redeemed people. It is one of their purchased and chartered privileges, that they shall not lack chastisement when their real welfare requires it.

These views are strikingly illustrated by the cases to which the Psalmist refers in the preceding context. You will observe, that in each of them he speaks of trials and sufferings, and these are not represented as of casual and accidental occurrence — but as *appointed and inflicted by God himself*, nor as of a slight and trivial nature — but as being often heavy and severe. Insomuch, that he speaks of "their souls fainting within them;" "of their sitting in darkness and the shadow of death, being bound in affliction and iron;" of "their hearts being brought down with labor;" of "their falling, when there was none to help;" of "their soul abhorring all manner of food," and of their being forced to cry "to the Lord in their trouble."

Yet, notwithstanding all this, or rather *for* this, among other reasons, the Psalmist declares, that "whoever shall observe these things, even they shall understand the loving-kindness of the Lord" — they shall understand it — they shall not only be convinced that the Lord is good — but they shall know the true nature of that goodness — as a principle which has regard, not to the mere exemption of his people from suffering, far less to the indiscriminate bestowal of universal happiness — but to the moral welfare — the spiritual health and happiness of men, as rational and immortal beings.

This is not only a very different — but a far higher kind of *benevolence* than that which is too frequently ascribed to God. The difference may be made manifest by a very familiar illustration. Suppose two parents, the one acting towards his family on the principle of indiscriminate indulgence — giving them all the means of enjoyment, and leaving each to follow the bent of his own desires, without any moral restraint or control. And the other, equally

desirous of his children's happiness — but remembering that each of them has within him a rational mind, a conscience, a set of moral affections, on the due discipline and right regulation of which their happiness depends, much more than on the abundance of temporal accommodations — adapts his treatment to the nature of the subject, and by wise instruction and faithful discipline, imposes restraints on self-indulgence, and makes their happiness depend on the culture and improvement of the moral powers.

Which, I ask, is the more benevolent? Not, surely, the man who leaves his children to sink unwarned, unchecked, unrestrained, into wicked indulgence, and all the miseries of which such indulgence is the cause! But the man who, by beneficial discipline, secures the ultimate happiness of his child, although it may be at the expense of temporary pain and restraint, by the culture of his moral principles, and the establishment of his moral habits.

It is on this principle of enlarged and comprehensive benevolence, that God, the Father of his people, acts. The very restraints which he imposes on them — the very chastisements with which he visits them, when these are viewed in connection with his *design* and *end* in them all — are pledges and tokens of that loving-kindness, which in him is not an isolated principle — but an attribute which, however supreme and infinite, is coordinate and co-active with perfect holiness, justice, and truth.

The duty of considering the course of God's providence will need little enforcement other than what may be deduced from the simple fact, that it is a means of understanding the loving-kindness of the Lord. For, what lesson should we be more anxious to learn, or what sweeter comfort can our minds receive, or what truth more grand and interesting — than the assurance of God's love?

But the propriety of looking back on all the ways by which God has been leading us, may be evinced by the consideration that the events of each man's life, like the more important events of history, can

seldom be impartially considered, or even fully understood, at the time of their occurrence. They occasion such an agitation of mind, and call into play so many feelings and passions, that we are too apt to take a partial view of them, especially while as yet the ends for which these dispensations were sent are unknown, or at least have not been realized in our experience. It is after the *stunning shock* has passed away — after the *storm of passion* has subsided, and after we have begun to taste the fruits of such painful dispensations, that we are able on a calm, though it may be a pensive review of them — to *see all the parts of this chequered drama in combination*, and to mark the wisdom and kindness which adjusted them all in relation to some great and important end.

Take one example as an illustration: the head of a young and engaging family, actively engaged in honorable business for their support, may be stunned by the sudden failure of all his schemes, and may not be able at the time to discover any reason arising out of his past conduct, *why* he should be involved in one of the severest of all calamities, a hopeless bankruptcy. But perhaps these very children, whom he loves so fondly, are just at an age when, if he were to enjoy *uninterrupted prosperity*, they might be led away by the seducing gaieties and vanities of the world. And for their sakes, God, who knows what is best, sends this heavy stroke, that, being subjected in early life to privation, they may be endued with thoughtfulness, nerved with an independent and industrious spirit, and thus fitted hereafter for usefulness.

All this may be unperceived at the time — but perhaps in the course of years, when that fond parent finds his children growing up with a chastened spirit, and entering life with hardy resolution, fitted by this very discipline for *industry, economy, and prudence*, and ultimately advanced, it may be, to stations for which an easier path might have unfitted them — he will have reason, in the gladness of his heart, to say, "It was *good for them* that I was afflicted." So we ought to judge nothing before the time — but to look to the *end* of God's dispensations, for, says the apostle, "You have heard of the

patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful and of tender mercy." (James 5.11.)

The complete, the comprehensive review of God's dispensations will be best taken from Heaven — when, on looking back from those celestial heights, on the whole course and progress and consummation of our lives, we shall see many proofs of God's *kindness* and *wisdom* in those very events which may seem to us at present, by reason of our darkness, to be mysterious or adverse.

But even now, and here, we should engage in this exercise. And in attending to this duty, it is needful for you to remember the *spirit* in which it befits you to consider the events of life. You should consider them in a religious spirit, acknowledging God's hand in them all, whether they may have been prosperous or adverse, and with a reference to those great ends which the Bible declares God to have in view, especially with a reference to your progressive sanctification, and your preparation for an eternal state.

The irreligious and careless may make light of the events of human life, for they think little of that eternity which lies before them, and with a view to which these events are ordered by unerring wisdom. But it is not thus that an immortal being should feel, who knows that life is the only season given to prepare him for eternity, and that of this short life one portion after another is fast passing away. Let him then review his past experience in a religious spirit, and he will find that if he is wise — truly wise towards God, duly instructed in religious truth, and capable of applying it to the explanation of providence, "even he shall understand the loving-kindness of the Lord."

The Danger of Misconstruing God's Dispensations.

"And *Jacob* their father said to them: You have bereaved me! Joseph is no more, Simeon is no more, and you want to take Benjamin. *All these things are against me!*" Genesis 42:36

The *severest trials* and the *strongest temptations* of God's people arise, in many cases, from the strength of their most innocent affections, and of their holiest principles.

We shall entertain a very partial and erroneous idea of *temptation*, if we suppose that it depends only on the presence, or derives its greatest strength from the power, of corrupt passion. For although it is true, that in one sense, "no man is tempted of God, and that every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lusts and enticed" — it is equally true that, in another sense, God does tempt or try his people, and that the strength of such temptations depends on the power of their holiest principles. Thus our blessed Lord himself was tempted.

Thus also, was *Abraham* tempted, when God commanded him to offer up his son Isaac on the altar — in this instance, the strength of the temptation arose from the innocent yearnings of a father's heart for a beloved and only son — but far more from the firm faith which Abraham exercised in God's promise, that in *Isaac*, the very son whom he was called to sacrifice, all the nations of the earth should be blessed. The *command* seemed to be against the *promise* of God; but the command being clear, Abraham prepared to offer up his only begotten son, leaving God to fulfill his own promise, in his own way, and accounting that, for its fulfillment, "God was able to raise him up, even from the dead." (Hebrews 11.19.)

We find *Jacob* subjected to a similar trial; but his faith, unlike that of Abraham, seems for a time to have forsaken him, and to have left

him, under the influence of a sorrowful, if not a desponding spirit. Nor is it astonishing, considering all the circumstances of the case, that, his faith in God's promise being for a time overclouded — he should have given utterance to this complaint. For, if we would estimate the strength of his present temptation, there are two circumstances in the character and situation of the Patriarch which should not be overlooked. The first is, that he seems from the whole narrative of his life, to have been a man of a mild contemplative character — a character in which the domestic affections are usually strongest, and which finds its chief earthly happiness in the welfare and comfort of a family. That, in point of fact, he did entertain a very strong natural affection for his children, unworthy as many of them were, and that no affliction, therefore, which could have fallen upon him would have affected him so deeply as the loss of one or more of them. All this is evident from his own pathetic language, "You have bereaved me! Joseph is no more, Simeon is no more, and you want to take Benjamin." "If I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved."

But while such was the affection with which he regarded all his children, there were two, for whom he had ever cherished a very peculiar and tender regard — the two children of his beloved Rachel, *Joseph* and *Benjamin*. And these were the children who, along with Simeon, were the immediate subjects of his present complaint. *Joseph* had been early lost to him — but was still tenderly remembered. And *Benjamin* had now been sent for to go down into Egypt by a powerful governor, of whose good intentions he had no security. And in these circumstances, all the grief which Joseph's loss had occasioned, was renewed in the affectionate heart of the old man, by the proposed departure of Benjamin.

Of Joseph it is said, "Israel loved *Joseph* more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age." And when Joseph was lost to him, it is said, "And all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and he said: For I shall go down into the grave to my son in mourning." Thus his father wept for him!" Genesis 37:35

Of Benjamin, again, it is said, that when the ten brethren were sent down to Egypt to get grain, "But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with the others, because he was afraid that harm might come to him!" And on being urged by them, he gave his reason, "My son will not go down there with you; his brother is dead and he is the only one left. If harm comes to him on the journey you are taking, you will bring my gray head down to the grave in sorrow!"

And his feelings, in reference to both the children of Rachel, are beautifully set forth in *Judah's* pathetic address to Joseph: "Your servant my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons. One of them went away from me, and I said, "He has surely been torn to pieces." And I have not seen him since. If you take this one from me too and harm comes to him, you will bring my gray head down to the grave in misery.' "So now, if the boy is not with us when I go back to your servant my father and if my father, whose life is closely bound up with the boy's life, sees that the boy isn't there, he will die. Your servants will bring the gray head of our father down to the grave in sorrow!" Genesis 44:27-31

The strong natural affection, therefore, which Jacob felt for all his children, and the peculiar and tender love which he cherished for the two sons of Rachel, cannot fail to be obvious, from these and similar passages. And it must be equally plain, that these sentiments, amiable as they were, were among the strongest ingredients in that trial to which he was now subjected, and to which he so far yielded, as to utter a desponding complaint. The strength of his temptation arose out of, and bore some proportion to, the strength of his natural affection. And his trial was such, as no indifferent or hard-hearted parent could either feel or understand.

So true it is, that God makes even the innocent affections of his people a means of trial, and uses them as instruments of discipline, for their spiritual good.

But we said that there were two circumstances in the character and situation of the Patriarch Jacob, which concurred to render this trial peculiarly severe; and the second of these is even more striking than the one already noticed. It consisted in the fact, that the loss of his children was a severe trial to his faith, as well as a heavy affliction to his natural feelings. For these children were the *children of promise* — and no calamity could befall them without awakening in his mind the painful thought, either that God was no longer faithful to his covenant, or that he had in some way forfeited the privileges of which it had given him assurance. For if you will consider the terms in which those privileges were promised, you shall find that the children were included in the covenant, along with the Patriarch; and that its choicest promises had an express reference to his posterity.

Thus the blessing which Jacob received from his father Isaac, has a direct reference to his children: "May God Almighty bless you and make you fruitful and increase your numbers until you become a community of peoples. May he give you and your descendants the blessing given to Abraham, so that you may take possession of the land where you now live as an alien, the land God gave to Abraham." Genesis 28:3-4

And the blessing which he had twice received directly from God himself, when with an audible voice he spoke to him out of Heaven, had the same express reference to his children: "Your seed shall be as the dust of the earth; and you shall spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south; and in you, and in your seed, shall all the families of the earth be blessed!" (Genesis 28:14; 35:11.)

You cannot fail to remember what importance is attached by an inspired apostle, to the latter part of this promise, as a short but comprehensive announcement of the Gospel covenant, wherein it was provided, that all the nations of the earth should be blessed in the seed of Jacob; not in seeds, as of many — but in his seed, as of one, that is Christ. The same promise had been given to Abraham,

and to Isaac before him — and now it was expressly limited to the line of Jacob's posterity. (Romans 9:13) And, whatever obscurity may have attached to a promise couched in such general terms, there can be no doubt that it was understood by Jacob to the extent at least of affording an assurance, that from among his posterity there should, in due time, be raised up a *deliverer*, such as he himself describes in his dying blessing to his children: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, Nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to Him shall be the obedience of the people." Genesis 49:10

Looking, then, on his posterity as the line of the promised Messiah, "the seed in whom all the nations of the earth were to be blessed," he could not fail to regard his children with very peculiar feelings as *the children of promise*. Nor could he contemplate any calamity which might befall them, without viewing it in connection with that *promise*. His faith in God's covenant was tried, not less than his natural affection, by any such events. And, accordingly, we find him pleading this promise, when he was alarmed for the safety of his family, by the supposed enmity of Esau: "Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau; for I fear him, lest he come and attack me and the mother with the children. For You said, 'I will surely treat you well, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.'" Genesis 32:11-12

He was delivered from his fears at that time; but now, he was placed in very different circumstances — he had already lost Joseph, whom he loved above all his brethren. Simeon had been detained as an hostage, by the governor of Egypt. And a further demand was made upon him to send down his *beloved Benjamin*. And when his children were thus, one after another, withdrawn from him, not only was his *parental tenderness* awakened — but his *faith in God's promise* itself seems to have been shaken; and in a moment of grief and despondency, he gave utterance to the complaint, "All these things are against me!"

Such seem to have been the *circumstances* in which Jacob was placed, and the feelings with which his mind was filled on this interesting occasion; and, if we consider the events as they must have appeared to the eye of sense, at the time, we cannot fail, I think, to acknowledge that they were discouraging indeed. Besides the loss of his children, he was threatened with famine; and so far as man could see, there was no prospect of a speedy deliverance, the only condition on which food was to be secured, being his parting with the child of his old age.

A large demand was thus made on his faith in God's promise, and on his trust in God's providence; and for a time it would seem that his faith was not equal to that demand. He did not exemplify the same vigorous faith which enabled Abraham at once to surrender Isaac, his only son. Perhaps the reason of this might be, that even believers are less apt to regard the course of God's providence with devout resignation, than they are to obey an audible voice from Heaven. But in truth and reality, God rules in providence not less than by extraordinary means; and all the while that Jacob was doubting and desponding, God was clearing the way for the accomplishment of his own counsel, and the fulfillment of his own promise.

The very events which occasioned his complaint, were in fact the means, not only of fulfilling the counsels of the Divine mind — but also of securing for Jacob the blessings and privileges which were dearest to his heart. For consider the circumstances of the case, as these are recorded with pathetic simplicity in the sacred narrative: *Joseph*, although long since given up as lost, was actually alive, and in great power, in the land of Egypt. The detention of *Simeon*, whereby the fears of his aged father had been awakened, was, in fact, a means of securing the return of some, at least, of his brethren into that land, were it only to obtain his release. And the demand that *Benjamin* should be sent along with them — a demand without their compliance with which, they were assured they might not hope either for *Simeon's* release, or for further supplies of food — was so imperative, that Jacob, notwithstanding all his reluctance, was

compelled to send him. And we find from the subsequent narrative that it was the sight of Benjamin, his own brother, that moved Joseph to tears, and led to his making himself known to his brethren.

Had Simeon not been detained in Egypt, the brethren might perhaps have had no further necessity for repairing there; or, had no demand been made for the appearance of Benjamin, the brethren might have gone to Egypt and returned as before, without any knowledge of Joseph. But the famine, the detention of Simeon, and the compulsory demand for Benjamin, were among the means by which God was preparing the way for bringing the whole family together, and planting them for a season in the land of Goshen.

While, therefore, Jacob was saying "All these things are against me!" he was misconstruing the intentions of an all-gracious providence, and looking with apprehension on those very events which were the appointed means not of depriving him again of one or more of his children — but of restoring to him Joseph, his best beloved son, and of preparing for the fulfillment of that gracious promise in which God had assured him that in his seed should all the families of the earth be blessed.

"All these things are against me!" was Jacob's desponding exclamation, when *he looked only at the outward and visible appearance of events*. But mark, how different was the testimony of faith, when the event had verified the faithfulness of God to his promise. "Be not grieved, said Joseph to his brethren, nor angry with yourselves, that you sold me hither; for God sent me before you to preserve life. God sent me before you, to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance." And, long after, he quieted the remorseful apprehensions of his brethren, by saying, "You intended to harm me, but *God intended it for good* to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives!"

In this fine recognition of divine providence, in an event so *distressing* to himself, and so *criminal* on the part of his brethren —

Joseph expressly declares, that his being sent into Egypt was the appointed means of providing for the support of Jacob's family, among many others, in a season of general famine. And there can be no doubt that the violent detention of Simeon in the land of Egypt, and the peremptory demand for Benjamin's appearance there, which were the immediate occasions of Jacob's complaint — were really the means of leading to that discovery of Joseph's being still alive, which secured for the patriarch and his family a safe and comfortable asylum in Goshen.

And these events, apparently so unpromising, led not only to the happy reunion of Joseph with his family — but also, to the continued residence of their descendants for four hundred years, in the land of Egypt, where, although in subsequent times they suffered many grievous calamities, God was keeping them as in a safe asylum, until the time should come, when the iniquity of the Canaanites being full — he should bring them out to possess the land that had been promised to their Fathers.

Into the *reasons* of their long residence in Egypt we cannot at present enter. Suffice it to say, that this was one of the most important dispensations of providence towards that family, and was subservient, in various ways, to the accomplishment of that gracious promise which had been given in covenant to the Patriarchs. And in this way, God was working to bring about, first, the restoration of Joseph to his family; and secondly, the fulfillment of all the promises which related to his posterity, by the very means which in an hour of anxiety and unbelief caused Jacob to exclaim, "All these things are against me!"

We see in this striking instance, how prone even a believer may be to misjudge the course of God's providence, when, instead of looking on the events of life with the eye of faith, he forms his judgment according to sensible appearances. And there can be no doubt that Jacob saw his error, when the event made manifest the purpose of God. For, having reluctantly consented to send Benjamin with his

brethren, and having prayed that God Almighty would give them mercy in the sight of the Egyptian governor, adding in a disconsolate spirit, "if I be bereaved of my children, I am bereaved" — on their return, he learned from them, "Joseph is yet alive, and he is governor over all the land of Egypt." On hearing their report, it is said, "Jacob's heart fainted, for he believed them not" — an expression which depicts a state of mind not uncommon, and another beautiful example of which we have in the case of our Lord's disciples, of whom it is said, that when the resurrection of their Lord was first announced to them, "they believed not for joy, and wondered."

But Jacob's unbelief was soon removed; for when they told him all the words of Joseph, which he had said unto them, and when he saw the wagons which Joseph had sent to carry him, the heart of Jacob their father revived, and Israel said, "It is enough; Joseph my son is yet alive! I shall go to see him before I die."

And afterwards he confessed his former error, and expressed his real satisfaction to Joseph himself, saying: "I never expected to see your face again, and now God has allowed me to see your children too" — and gratefully acknowledges, "Your father's blessings are greater than the blessings of the ancient mountains, than the bounty of the age-old hills. Let all these rest on the head of Joseph, on the brow of the prince among his brothers." Genesis 49:26

These expressions show that Jacob now recognized the hand of a gracious providence in all that had befallen him, and that he no longer looked on these events with unbelieving discontent. And surely had he been able to *foresee* the result, or, not foreseeing, had he *believed* that all things would work together for the accomplishment of such gracious ends, (Psalm 105:17,) he could not have uttered the complaint of my text, "All these things are against me!"

Another remarkable feature in this instructive case deserves to be shortly noticed. It is not unusual for God to send one trial of faith

after another; and so it was in the present instance. Jacob was called to leave the land of Canaan, which had been promised to him for an inheritance, and to go down into Egypt. Let it be remembered that God's promise had special reference to the possession of that land, which Jacob was now called to leave — that it was the land of which God had spoken to Abraham, and to Isaac, to which Isaac referred in pronouncing his blessing on Jacob, and respecting which God had himself said to him, "The land whereon you lie, to you will I give it, and to your seed." (Genesis 28:4-13.) And again, "The land which I gave Abraham and Isaac to you I will give it, and to your seed after you will I give the land." (Genesis 35:12.)

Yet now, he and his family were called to leave the land of Canaan and to go down into Egypt; and this must have been to him as severe a trial of his faith as any that had hitherto befallen him. But now, we have no apparent symptom of hesitation, no expression of distrust, respecting God's faithfulness; on the contrary, a cheerful acquiescence in the call: "It is enough; Joseph my son is yet alive! I will go and see him before I die." When he was threatened with the loss of his children, he had said, "All these things are against me!" but now no expression of discontent escapes him when he is called to leave the land of promise. And the reason seems to have been, that the arrival of his sons from Egypt, and their report of Joseph's being yet in life, had convinced him that God was working in a way which he had formerly misconstrued; and that the very events which he had deprecated as his sorest calamities — were likely to bring about the accomplishment of his gracious purposes. Accordingly, "Israel took his journey with all that he had."

It is not to be supposed, indeed, that he could leave the land of Canaan without regret, or contemplate his prospects in Egypt without some apprehension. But he took the first step in his journey; and one step having been taken in faith — God rewarded its exercise by appearing to him at Beersheba, and saying, "I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will

surely bring you back again. And Joseph's own hand will close your eyes." Genesis 46:3-4

So he went down in to Egypt; and never from that hour does his faith in God's promise appear to have failed. On the contrary, he expressed his gratitude that he had there been brought to see Joseph again; and his confidence that God would in due time visit his family, and call them back into the land of Canaan. In this faith he commanded that his bones should be buried in the sepulcher of his fathers, saying to Joseph, "I am dying; but God shall be with you, and bring you again unto the land of your fathers."

In the same faith, *Joseph*, now near his end, said to his brethren, "God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land unto the land which he swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" — and took an oath of them that they would carry up his bones also, out of that land. "By faith," says the apostle, "Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel, and gave commandment concerning his bones." (Hebrews 11.22.)

In the faith of *Jacob* and *Joseph* respecting the ultimate return of their posterity to the promised land, a return which was not to be accomplished for several hundred years, we see *a bright example of trust in the faithfulness of God*. And in the actual occurrence of that event, through the agency of Moses, we see how surely — yet by what extraordinary means, the fulfillment follows every word which the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

Whereas, in the desponding exclamation of Jacob, "All these things are against me!" — we see an example of what is, alas! but too common even among God's own people, of distrust in his faithfulness, when the outward appearance of events seems unpromising — a misjudging of his providence, and a limiting of the Holy One of Israel. While, in the outcome of these very events by which such feelings were occasioned, we see that *even by the unlikeliest means, God's purposes are fulfilled — that real, and*

substantial, and permanent good is often brought out of apparent evil; and that as dark as some of his dispensations may be — his people will, in the end, be constrained to acknowledge, that he has done all things well, that goodness and mercy have followed them all the days of their lives.

Brethren, "Everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope!" Romans 15:4. Our circumstances may frequently resemble those of the Patriarch Jacob. To us the dispensations of providence may sometimes be as *dark* and as *perplexing* as they were at that time to him. And when one unexpected calamity after another befalls us, our faith, like his, may be ready to fail, so as that in the bitterness of sorrow and disappointment, we may be apt to exclaim, "All these things are against me!" But let us learn the lesson which the subsequent experience of Jacob is fitted to teach, and we shall be forearmed against this temptation. Let us reflect on the fact, that the very events which to him appeared the most threatening and adverse — were in reality the appointed means of working out for him and his family a gracious deliverance. Let us rest assured that God is still faithful to his promise — that however unpromising the aspect of providence may sometimes be, God is working unseen for the accomplishment of his own purpose — and that as Jacob had, so we too shall have reason to acknowledge in the end, that "he has done all things well."

It is true that we cannot foresee the outcome of his present dispensations, nor calculate either on the time or on the method of our deliverance from what may be painful in them. And it is equally true, that under our tribulations, great and manifold as they frequently are — we cannot fail to be deeply affected by suffering; were we insensible to their pressure, or were we prescient of their termination — they might not serve their chief purpose, that of cherishing a spirit of absolute submission to God's will, and implicit faith in his promise. But we have the general assurance, that "all things shall work together for good to those who love God!" And we

have, among others, the case of Jacob, as an illustration of the way in which God fulfills his gracious purposes by means the least likely to human prudence, and the most trying to flesh and blood. And have we not also sufficient evidence in our own past experience, of the same great and precious truth — can we not remember some past trials under which we were ready to say, "All these things are against me!" — and yet, were we not brought through them, and enabled in some measure to look back on them with acquiescence and even with gratitude, as needful and beneficial means of moral discipline and improvement?

Have we not reason to be grateful, if they were the means of bringing us nearer to God; and should not our own experience, therefore, as well as the history of Jacob, convince us, that we should contemplate every new aspect of providence with a lively faith in God — that we should patiently wait for the development of his purposes, in the assurance that nothing *really* evil shall be permitted to befall us?

And while we contemplate with wonder the mysterious or the solemn ways of providence, remember that we should judge nothing before the time. A rash and premature judgment of God's ways in providence, as it is presumptuous, so it is sure to be erroneous, and the occasion of much misery. God's Providence is like a vast machine, in which there are many wheels, some of which seem to be moving in one direction, others in the opposite direction. And if we fasten our eye upon one wheel only, we cannot see how the end will be gained; it may seem to move contrary to the design. But it is by a *combination* that it works; the whole must be viewed together, if we would see the wisdom of the contrivance — or we must wait for the accomplishment of the work, if we would judge of the fitness of the means. Even so, providence has many wheels — but all are working together for good to those who love God.

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;

He plants his footsteps in the sea,
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never-failing skill,
He treasures up his bright designs,
And works his sovereign will.

You fearful saints, fresh courage take,
The clouds you so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flower.

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan his works in vain,
God is his own interpreter,
And he will make it plain.

Cowper.

Repentance.

"As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent." Revelation 3:19

The Redeemer himself speaks to us in these affecting words. He informs us, that *as the administrator of their affairs*, he is often pleased to rebuke and chasten his people, and thus teaches them *to ascribe all their afflictions to his hand*. He represents these afflictions as rebukes and chastisements, which presuppose guilt or declension on their part, and which imply vigilant inspection, and even some measure of holy displeasure on his. While, at the same time, he declares that they proceed from love, such love as seeks to secure their ultimate and eternal welfare, though it should be by means of present discipline of a very painful kind. And he represents these two considerations as reasons why they should be zealous and repent.

Hence, the general lesson which we derive from these words, and which we propose to illustrate and apply, is, that affliction, as it is here described, includes in it the two grand motives to evangelical repentance, and is both designed and fitted to produce a broken and a contrite spirit.

Repentance is used, in Scripture, sometimes in a *wider* sense, and sometimes in a more *restricted* sense.

In its largest acceptance, it signifies a change of mind and heart — a thorough, radical, and permanent renovation of our moral nature. And in this sense, it is synonymous with that change which is called regeneration, and described as "a new birth." In this way it seems to be used by our Lord, when he said, "Repent and believe the Gospel;" and by the apostles, when they said, "Repent and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out." In these and similar passages, the whole change which takes place on the mind and heart of a sinner when he is renewed or born again, seems to be denoted by repentance.

But it is also used in a more limited sense, to denote the views which he then begins to entertain respecting one special subject, namely,

the demerit of sin in general, and the exceeding sinfulness of his own sins in particular.

1. The *two principal motives to evangelical repentance* which the Bible presses on our attention are these:
the evil and odious nature of sin, and
the love and mercy of God towards the sinner.

There can be no true repentance without a correct scriptural apprehension of the evil of sin. It presupposes a work of conviction, such as in some respects may be common, indeed, to many, who are not converted — but which must be experienced by every sinner before he can be brought to the Savior. Many a convinced sinner may fall short of conversion; but every converted sinner must have passed through the stage of conviction.

The experience of all is not, indeed, the same — it may differ in the circumstantial of time, of degree, of duration. But in substance it is the same, inasmuch as we cannot even conceive of a sinner coming in good earnest to the Savior, until he has been brought under convictions of guilt. A man may hear of a celebrated physician, and may believe that he has effected many wonderful cures — but until he feels that he is himself diseased and in danger — he will not apply to him for his own relief. Just so, the name of the Savior may be on the lips of many a careless sinner, and his grace and power may be admitted. But until he knows *his own guilt and danger*, however he may speak about Christ, he will not come to Christ in good earnest for pardon and salvation.

The first beneficial effect of the preaching of the Gospel, and the first hopeful symptom on the part of any hearer, is *a deep conviction of sin* — a conviction which may at first consist chiefly in a sense of personal guilt, in a vivid apprehension of danger, and a fear of impending judgment. The sinner begins to see that *God is not to be trifled with*; that he is a just lawgiver and righteous judge, whose wrath is dreadful, and his power omnipotent, and that his own

personal guilt is a sad reality which he cannot deny, and for which no excuse or apology can be devised.

He may have thought of God before, and of guilt too, and of the eternity that lay before him; but he never *realized* them — he never laid them to heart as he does now. Then he was careless — now he is deeply concerned, and the language of his heart is, "*what must I do to be saved?*" But while some such convictions are presupposed in the case of every penitent, we must carefully guard against the delusion of confounding them with that contrition which the Gospel describes.

There may be much *conviction* where there is no *contrition*. There may be many fears, and much remorse, where there is no gospel repentance. Many a man may tremble at Hell, who has no hatred of sin. He may be sorry for his sins on no other account than this, that they threaten to involve him in suffering. There is a *false* and a *true* repentance. "*Godly* sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret — but *worldly* sorrow brings death." (2 Corinthians 7.10.)

There are many points of difference between the two; but the grand specific difference, and that on which all the others depend, consists in this: that while true repentance presupposes conviction of sin, it implies also a sense of God's forgiving love, or "an apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ." The goodness of God leads to repentance, not only by giving space and opportunity to repent — but because it is one of the motives by which we are melted and subdued into a contrite frame of mind. So long as the sinner, under conviction of guilt, thinks only of the terrors of the Lord, he may tremble — but he will not repent. His heart is hardened rather than subdued by the fearful looking for of judgment. He resembles a slave or a criminal under the frown of a powerful master or judge — rather than a child, whose heart swells at the thought of having offended a father.

The devils believe and tremble — but they do not repent. An apprehension of God's love and mercy is needful to melt our stubborn hearts — and that will subdue those whom terror will only exasperate. "So I will establish my covenant with you, and you will know that I am the LORD. Then, when I make atonement for you for all you have done — you will remember and be ashamed and never again open your mouth because of your humiliation, declares the Sovereign LORD." Ezekiel 16:62-63

This beautiful principle is confirmed by the universal experience of God's people. Before they knew the grace of God in truth, they may have been under deep convictions of conscience — they may have trembled at God's wrath — but still their hearts were disposed rather to resist God than to submit to him. Their hearts were full of desperate enmity against him — until that enmity was slain by the manifestation of his love. But so soon as they clearly discerned the riches of his forgiving mercy, they relented. They said, what are we that we should be at variance with him who has loved us? Oh! how could we rebel against such a Being, or why should we continue to rebel, when his mercy is so freely proclaimed, and we are so affectionately invited to return?

The *prodigal son* was wretched, very wretched, when he wandered in a strange land — and it was not until he thought of his kind-hearted father, and his father's house, that he repented and said, "I will go unto my father, and say unto him, Father, I have sinned!"

Nor is it difficult to account for the effect of God's mercy in subduing the heart and producing penitence. For besides the influence of kindness, to which no human mind is altogether insensible — it is clear, that so long as the sinner knows nothing of God's grace, and has no hope of forgiveness, it is his interest, and it will be his endeavor to think as little, and to make as light, of his sins as he can. He is forced by sheer terror either to devise plausible excuses for them — or to question the justice of God in punishing them. For if he saw them in all their heinousness, and had no hope of escape, he

would be driven to absolute despair. But when he obtains a realizing sense of God's mercy in Christ — he is no longer under the necessity of hiding his guilt, or seeking to extenuate it. He can look on it in all its length and breadth without dismay. I truly believe that then, for the first time, does the sinner see his whole sinfulness, when, being freed from terror, he can entertain the subject with dispassionate impartiality, and sound the very lowest depths of his guilt, in the full assurance that God's love can deliver him out of it all.

We have seen that the two principal motives to evangelical repentance are, the *evil nature of sin* on the one hand, and the *love and mercy of God* to the sinner on the other hand.

Now, unquestionably, the chief source and spring of these motives is, the *cross of Christ*. A believing apprehension of the truths which are displayed in Christ's cross, is the proper root of evangelical repentance. For there we behold such a manifestation, both of the evil nature of sin, and of God's love to the sinner — as cannot fail, when duly apprehended, at once to convince and impress the conscience, and to melt and subdue the heart. There we see how true it is that, in the bosom of our Supreme Governor and Judge, there may exist at one and the same time, a sentiment of righteous displeasure — and yet a sentiment of divine compassion; nay, even a purpose of saving grace and mercy! Such *displeasure*, as implies in it no hatred; yet such *love*, as consists with the most inflexible adherence to righteousness and truth.

For when we consider Christ, God's only begotten and well-beloved Son in whom he was well pleased, subjected on the cross to the most painful sufferings, and that, too, after he had repeatedly and with great earnestness offered up the earnest prayer, "Father! if it is possible, let this cup pass from me!" And when we farther consider, that the cup of divine wrath was nevertheless put into his hands; that the same God of whom it is written, that "he afflicts not willingly, nor grieves the children of men," "was pleased to bruise him, and to put him to grief" — and this, too, because he, who knew no sin, had been

made sin for us; that" he was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities" — how can we fail to see in Christ's cross a most impressive manifestation of the evil nature and desert of sin, and a most instructive commentary both on the certainty and the nature of God's displeasure on account of it.

The reality of God's displeasure against sin, and his righteous and inflexible determination to punish it, cannot be questioned, without virtually incurring the guilt of either denying the reality and severity of Christ's sufferings — or imputing to God the capricious and cruel infliction of suffering, without any adequate reason, on the person of his beloved Son.

The reality of God's displeasure against sin being thus established by the fact of the Redeemer's crucifixion — Oh! what a flood of light does that one fact of his crucifixion throw upon the nature of this displeasure — for here he suffered for sin, of whom it is written that he was, notwithstanding, God's Well-beloved Son! He, with whom God was in all other respects well pleased, was made a curse for us; nay, the very Son of God, who testified, saying, "Therefore does my Father love me, because I lay down my life for the sheep" — thereby representing his death itself as acceptable to God — did nevertheless exclaim in the garden, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death!" — and on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me!"

And who does not see that God's displeasure against sin, however real and however severe, is the *calm sentiment of a righteous Governor and Judge*; that it implies, indeed, a supreme regard to his own glory, and an unchangeable determination to assert the majesty and to vindicate the honor of his law, even though it should be by the infliction of suffering. Yet it implies nothing like human hatred, cruelty, or revenge. And that while the *cross of Christ* does address a most solemn warning — a warning all the more solemn and impressive, by reason of the absence of every indication of human passion on the part of God — to those who make light of sin, or trifle

with God's eternal justice — it does at the same time afford a lesson of *encouragement* and *consolation* to every penitent sinner.

For, besides the illustration which it affords of the nature of God's judicial displeasure — the cross of Christ affords the most amazing proof of the riches of his love. For that sacrifice of Christ, in which we read the most solemn proof of the exceeding sinfulness of sin, and of the wrath with which God regards — is itself the most affecting pledge of his love to the sinner. He who, on looking to the cross, beholds God's justice there — may also, by looking to the cross, behold God's mercy too! Calvary speaks out more impressively than ever Sinai spoke, of the terrors of the Lord. But amidst the darkness which enveloped the cross, amidst the rending of the rocks, and the opening of the graves, and all the sublime mysteries of that unparalleled scene — we hear the still small voice proclaiming "glory to God on the highest, peace on earth, and good will to men." For "God so loved the world as to give his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him might not perish — but might have eternal life."

The cross of Christ, then, is the chief source of the two great motives to evangelical repentance, because it exhibits such a manifestation of God's character, as is fitted to awaken in our minds:

first, a penetrating sense of our own sinfulness,
secondly, a lively apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ.

But *affliction* is also, and for the same reason, a secondary source of the same motives to repentance. For it is very remarkable that in the text, our blessed Lord represents the afflictions of his people as manifestations at once of his *displeasure* and of his *love* — and urges this consideration as a reason for repentance: "As many as I *love*, I rebuke and chasten; be zealous, therefore, and repent."

It is unquestionably to the cross of Christ that we must look for the most *impressive manifestation of the divine perfections*, and

especially of the sentiments with which he regards the transgression of his law. For without understanding the doctrine of the cross, we cannot enter into the mystery of the afflictions of his people. But every disciple who has been enabled clearly to apprehend the justice and the love of God, as they are displayed in the cross of Christ, and who has felt the power of these evangelical motives to repentance — will be at no loss to understand how it is that the sufferings of believers contribute to the same result, seeing that they manifest the same divine perfections, although, in some respects, and these of great importance, they differ widely from the sufferings of Christ.

Not only did *his* sufferings differ from theirs in *degree*, as being unspeakably more severe — but also in their general *character* and *design*, as being . . .

the sole and all-sufficient atonement,
the full legal payment of the penalty of sin,
the complete judicial satisfaction to divine justice, and
the only and entire vindication and fulfillment of the divine law.

Hence we are carefully to guard against the error of supposing that the sufferings of his people are, in any sense, or to any extent, *expiatory* of their guilt, or *satisfactory* to God's justice.

But while this is unquestionably the doctrine of Scripture, it is equally true, on the other hand, that in the sufferings of believers we see another and a different manifestation of the same divine perfections which are displayed in the sufferings of Christ. *They manifest at once God's holy displeasure against sin — and his love towards his people.* And by reason of this resemblance between the two cases, the sufferings of believers are called *their cross*. For thus said Jesus to his disciples, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up *his cross* and follow me." (Matthew 16.24.) "Whoever does not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14.27.)

We read, then, not of one cross — but of two: the cross of Christ, and the cross of every believer; and these *differ* the one from the other in some respects of great importance, while in others they *agree*.

The cross of Christ differs from the believer's cross, not only in respect to the *peculiar kind of suffering* which he endured — but also, and principally, in respect to the *end* which it fulfilled, as an atonement for sin. It was by Christ's cross, and not by the cross of any believer, that God was reconciled, "for having made peace by the blood of his cross," it pleased the Father, "by him to reconcile all things to himself," (Colossians 1.20,) "that he might reconcile both Jews and Gentiles unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby." (Ephesians 2:16.) It was by Christ's cross that the law was magnified and fulfilled; for the "handwriting of ordinances that was against us, he took out of our way, nailing it to his cross." (Colossians 2:14.) It is Christ's cross that is the believer's chief glory, "God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ." (Galatians 6.14.) It is Christ's cross by which the believer is crucified: "The cross of the Lord Jesus Christ by which the world is crucified unto me and I unto the world." The cross of Christ was the chief subject of apostolic preaching, and is still the most powerful means of conversion. "The preaching of the cross is to those who perish, foolishness; but unto us who are saved, it is the power of God!" (1 Corinthians 1.18.)

There is thus a super-eminent value in the cross of Christ, as being the sole reason of our pardon and justification, and also the principal means of our progressive sanctification — the most illustrious manifestation of God's character, and the chief source and fountain of all the motives which tend to the renewal and improvement of our own.

But this does not hinder the legitimate use of another cross — I mean *the cross which every believer is appointed to bear*. The cross of the believer differs from the cross of Christ. The believer's cross implies no atonement, offers no satisfaction to divine justice, and affords no

ground of pardon or acceptance with God. The believer's cross is *laid upon him* — but he is not *nailed* to it as Christ was. There is the same difference between the believer and his Divine Master in this respect, as there was between Jesus who was nailed to the accursed tree, and Simon of Cyrene, whom they compelled to bear his cross, (Matthew 27.32,) and who was seen drawing near to Calvary with that cross on his shoulders, on which he was not to be suspended, and the torments of which were reserved for the Son of God.

But still the believer has a cross to bear; and that cross resembles, in some respects, the cross of his Lord. For not only are the sufferings of the Christian expressly called *his cross*, and not only is every believer required to take up *his cross* and follow Christ; but these sufferings are spoken of as *the sufferings of Christ*. "For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds by Christ." (2 Corinthians 1.5) — that we may know "the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death." (Philippians 2:10.) "Rejoice, inasmuch as you are partakers of Christ's sufferings, that when his glory shall be revealed, you may be glad also with exceeding joy." (1 Peter 4.13.)

These expressions intimate, not merely that the believer virtually suffered with Christ on the cross, and died with him there — but that the believer has sufferings of his own, which, although they are not to the slightest extent, expiatory of sin, or satisfactory to divine justice — they do, nevertheless, bear some resemblance to those of his glorified Master, and are, on account of that resemblance, described as *his cross*.

Now, the believer's cross resembles the cross of Christ in this important particular — that it is a secondary source of the same motives to evangelical repentance, of which the cross of Christ is the chief spring and fountain. *The sufferings of every believer afford a manifestation at once of the justice and the love of God* — and they ought to be improved for the twofold use of deepening our

convictions of the exceeding sinfulness and demerit of sin, and of strengthening our apprehensions of God's paternal goodness.

"As many as I *love*, I rebuke and chasten."

Here, mark **1st**, that the believer's cross is like the cross of Christ — a manifestation of God's love. "Whom the Lord *loves*, he chastens, and scourges every son whom he receives." "Whoever is wise and will observe these things, even they shall understand the loving-kindness of the Lord." *The believer must not regard the cross which the Lord lays upon him as a mark of reprobation — but as a badge of sonship.* He may feel it to be a heavy burden, and may often be ready to faint under it; but he must not question the love of God on account of it. Oh! no. *That very cross is the fruit of a Father's love; it was framed for him by a Father's wisdom, and has been laid on him by a Father's hand.*

This is at once a soul-subduing and soul-supporting thought in times of trouble! The believer is not *improving* the discipline of God's providence as he ought — if he fails to regard the cross which he bears, as manifesting the same love to him which was displayed in the cross of Christ.

But mark, **2nd**, the believer's cross is also, like the cross of Christ, a manifestation of the evil of sin, and of God's righteous displeasure on account of it. The believer is taught to consider it as such, when it is represented in the text and elsewhere, as a rebuke and chastisement. It is not the *penal* satisfaction of God's justice — for that was completed and exhausted by the cross of Christ. But it is a chastisement, it is a rebuke, all the more fitted to subdue and humble, that *it proceeds from the hand of a forgiving and reconciled Father.*

We are too apt to fall into one extreme or other, in considering this subject. Sometimes the believer looks only on the *dark side of his cross*, and can see nothing in it but a terrible token of God's

displeasure; and then no wonder that his heart quails, and his spirit is overwhelmed within him. At other times, he looks only to the *bright side* of it, and, rejoicing in the assurance that his very sufferings are the fruit and token of a Father's love, he forgets or fails suitably to improve the solemn consideration, that the cross he wears is really a rebuke and chastisement — a proof that he needs correction, and a token of God's displeasure.

Nay, so little accustomed are too many professing Christians to entertain the comprehensive fullness of Gospel truth on this subject, that not a few may be ready to exclaim: *How can we consider our afflictions as tokens of God's displeasure — when we read that they are tokens of his love?* This is a mystery to them; but why should it be so, if they can at all enter into the mystery of Christ's cross? There both justice and mercy, both love and displeasure, both severity and grace — are displayed, not as conflicting or antagonist principles — but in unison and harmony, concurring in the same design, and cooperating for the same result.

And so is it also in the believer's cross. That cross is a fruit of love — and yet it is also a token of God's displeasure. And surely it cannot be difficult to reconcile these two ideas, when we can so easily conceive of *an affectionate Father being displeased*. But were it more difficult than it is to form a correct conception of such a state of mind on the part of God, there can be no difficulty in seeing, and there ought to be no reluctance to acknowledge — that everywhere in Scripture, affliction is represented as a manifestation both of love and displeasure.

"For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you," says the LORD your Redeemer." (Isaiah 54:7, 8.) "For this is what the high and lofty One says — he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to

revive the heart of the contrite. I will not accuse forever, nor will I always be angry, for then the spirit of man would grow faint before me — the breath of man that I have created. I was enraged by his sinful greed; I punished him, and hid my face in anger, yet he kept on in his willful ways. I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will guide him and restore comfort to him!" (Isaiah 57:15-18.) "Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear." (Isaiah 59:1.) "If his sons forsake my law and do not follow my statutes, if they violate my decrees and fail to keep my commands, I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging; but I will not take my love from him, nor will I ever betray my faithfulness." (Psalm 89:30-33)

And so in the text, "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten, be zealous therefore and repent." Viewed in this light, *the believer's cross* is a call to evangelical repentance. It matters not what that cross may be; it may be heavier or lighter, it may consist of many trials or few, still it is a cross which he must bear, and which is designed at once to impress his mind with a sense of his own unworthiness, and to fill it with profound fear of God's justice, and a lively apprehension of his paternal kindness. Every believer should consider his cross in this light — and *then he will know experimentally both its sanctifying virtue, and its consoling power.*

Holy Resolutions

"I will go into Your house with burnt offerings; I will pay You my vows, which my lips have uttered and my mouth has spoken when I was in trouble." Psalm 66:13-14

We learn from these words that the Psalmist "vowed unto the Lord" in the time of trouble. His vows had reference partly to that mode of worship and service which was established by the dispensation under which he lived — he resolved to glorify God "by going into his house with burnt-offerings" — and partly, also, to those services of praise and thanksgiving, which have been the universal and permanent expression of religious homage under every successive dispensation: "You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy — that my heart may sing to you and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever!" Psalm 30:11-12

Such were the Psalmist's vows — and they embodied, as it were, those sentiments which affliction taught him to entertain, in regard both to God and himself. You are well aware that sacrifice under the old dispensation was partly *typical* and partly *ritualistic* — that in the one case, it exhibited and expressed a just sense of the evil nature of sin, and of God's displeasure on account of it — while it prefigured or typified that one sacrifice by which the Lamb of God should take away the sins of the world. And, in the other case, it was a grateful acknowledgment of the Lord's goodness — a joyful commemoration of his wonderful deliverances. A believer, under the old dispensation, was naturally led by affliction to cherish those feelings, of which sacrifice was then the proper expression. For just in proportion as affliction impressed his mind with a lively sense of his own sinfulness, or with a reverential fear of God's justice — his subdued and humbled spirit would take refuge in that *rite of sacrifice* which, as it expressed all that he felt of the evil of sin, so did it also point to a remission of sins, through the shedding of blood. Thus at once deepening his humiliation and confirming his hope — while the experience of God's faithfulness and love, in the time of trouble, furnished fresh materials and motives for those sacrifices of thanksgiving, and those songs of praise, which were the appropriate expressions of his gratitude and joy.

Shall it be said, then, that, under the new and more perfect dispensation of the Gospel, the afflictions of God's people can have no corresponding effect, and their experience under it no suitable expression? Are not believers, in modern times, taught the same great lessons in the *school of trial* which prompted the vows that were uttered by David? Are they not taught the evil of sin, and the justice of God, and the necessity of salvation? Have they not also a rich experience of his paternal love, and many reasons both for humility and gratitude? And shall we suppose that there is no proper expression for their inward feelings — no duty resulting from their discipline — no obligation imposed by their experience both of mercy and of judgment?

Far from it! Sacrifices such as David offered have ceased in the Christian Church — just because the great Atoning sacrifice has been offered for sin. But if we have been taught, as David was, *the spiritual lessons which affliction unfolds* — we shall have recourse, with greater earnestness than ever, to that one Sacrifice which has finished transgression, and made an end of sin — and to the sacrament by which that sacrifice is now commemorated, as formerly it was prefigured by sacrifice — and we shall feel it to be our delightful privilege to say, in the very words of David, "What shall I render to the Lord for all his kindness? I will take the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord — I will pay my vows now unto the Lord, in the presence of all his people!"

We cannot conceive, indeed, of the end of affliction being fulfilled, without producing a purpose or resolution of amendment, such as, whether it assumes the formal shape of a vow or not — has in it all the moral force and obligation of a solemn engagement to the Lord. Whether we consider the day of trouble as designed for our instruction, for our reproof, and for our probation, or as a means of fitting us for farther trials — for future temptations — for more extensive usefulness — for the hour of death, or for eternal glory — in each of these respects, it affords a suitable occasion, and addresses to us a loud call for new engagements and resolutions in the way of

duty. We cannot have experienced the sanctified use of affliction, unless we have been brought to resolve, and to resolve in right earnest, that, "whatever others do — as for us, we will serve the Lord."

A solemn resolution or engagement to that effect is the proper fruit of those convictions, and that experience which we have had in the time of trouble. The natural connection between affliction and some such solemn engagements, may be illustrated by a few practical examples.

Is affliction designed for our reproof? Is it fitted to humble us, and to prove us, and to show us what is in our hearts? Then *how* does it accomplish this end? Is it not by leading every believer to review the course of his life — to inquire into the state of his heart — and to mark what in either may have been offensive to God? If, in the course of this inquiry, the believer discerns, as he will have no difficulty in doing, some *sins* which do most easily beset him, some *temptations* to which he is most prone to yield, some *graces* of the Christian character in which he is most defective — he will doubtless, in the first instance, confess his sin before the Lord. But must not his convictions be slight indeed, and must not his painful discipline be equally unproductive — if they terminate in *mere confession*, and lead to *no practical change*?

If, in the time of sickness, the remembrance of some one sin has been peculiarly burdensome to his conscience — is it possible that he can have confessed that sin to the Lord without at least forming the purpose of forsaking it? He who *confesses* and *forsakes* his sin shall find mercy. But mere confession unaccompanied with a resolution to amend, is unavailing, because it springs rather from remorse of conscience — than from that evangelical repentance which implies not only a sincere grief, but a holy hatred for sin, and leads the penitent to turn from it unto God with the full purpose of, and endeavor after new obedience.

And hence, in this psalm, David, who was deeply sensible of his own sinfulness, and yet so thoroughly alive to the freeness of divine grace that he regarded his past transgressions as no reason why he should despair of pardon and acceptance with God — declares, nevertheless, his solemn conviction of the necessity of true repentance, and a thorough change of heart, in these emphatic words: "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." (Psalm 66.18.) Not that a man must be righteous or innocent, before he can hope for God's favor; for David was deeply sinful, and looked for pardon from God's sovereign grace and mercy. Nor that he must be so thoroughly sanctified, as to become perfect, for David was still compassed about with iniquity, and felt, as did the apostle, the law in his members warring against the law of his mind. But still, his declaration is deeply significant — and it plainly implies that there can be no true repentance, and no hope therefore of God's pardon and favor — where the soul still cleaves to its idols — where there is either a conscious determination to continue in the indulgence of sin, or no settled purpose of heart to forsake it.

In the case of an unregenerate man, conscience often awakens remorse and alarm in the time of sickness, on account of his past sins — his impurity, or his dishonesty, or someone act of aggravated guilt, burdens his mind and gives him no rest. And many a sinner has in such circumstances, been brought to confess his sin unto the Lord, to lay to heart his real condition, and to form the purpose of breaking off his sins by repentance. In such a case, when the purpose is carried out into performance, we see the *sanctified use of affliction*.

But what would we say of a *drunkard*, who while he mourns over his past conduct and confesses its sinfulness, is yet conscious of no resolution to forsake his degrading indulgence. Or what would we say of a *dishonest man*, who while he confesses his iniquity in words, is yet conscious of no intention to relinquish his gainful frauds, or to make restitution to those whom he had wronged? Would we not say, that here there is no evidence of repentance, and that the design of his affliction had not been fulfilled?

And why should we conclude otherwise, in the case of God's professing people. If any of them have been convinced in the time of trouble, that they have contracted habits of worldliness, which are inconsistent with their character as candidates for Heaven; or that they have indulged evil tempers, by which they have brought reproach on the Christian name; if, in fine, there is any one sin or omission of duty which, in a time of sickness, has pressed heavily on their conscience — would we not expect that, if their affliction is really sanctified to them, they will not only be humbled on account of that sin — but induced also to resolve that they will guard against and forsake it in time to come.

And so, when affliction is considered as a means of instruction, it imparts new views, and new impressions of divine truth — such as should produce new and more earnest resolutions of entire devotedness to God.

If in the time of *trouble*, the believer feels that the truths of God's word are peculiarly solemn and impressive — if in the prospect of *death*, he reads the Bible, with all-engrossing interest, and feels that the whole world is nothing to him in comparison with that precious volume — then is it too much to expect, that he should so improve his experience as to resolve, that hereafter, his chief attention will be bestowed on its contents — that he will take it as the man of his counsel, as the rule of his life, and as his song in the house of his pilgrimage?

If in the time of trouble, the believer receives new and more impressive views of the relative magnitude and the mutual relations of *time* and *eternity*; if, in one aspect, *time* appears as nothing when compared with eternity, being but as a drop of water compared to the ocean — or a grain of sand compared to the sea-shore — a dream, a vapor, the shadow of smoke — while in another aspect, when considered in its connection with eternity, as the only season that is given for preparation, it rises into transcendent importance by reason of its momentous outcomes — then is it too much to expect,

that he should, under such impressions, resolve to live for eternity, and, for that end, redeem the time?

If, in the day of trouble, the believer feels as if the spell which *this fleeting world* too often imposes on him, had been broken, and sees with the clearness of intuition, that there is one only thing which should greatly concern him, and in comparison with which, all other interests are mere trifles — the salvation of his immortal soul — if he is so thoroughly penetrated by this conviction, that he would give all he had in the world to secure it; Oh! is it too much then to expect, that, under such impressions, he will resolve to regard this as the one thing that is needful, to avoid everything in the business or pleasures of life that might endanger his safety, and to be diligent in the use of every means by which the welfare of his soul may be advanced?

If, in the time of trouble, and especially in the prospect of death, he feels, as he ought, how precious is the favor of God, how great is the redemption of Christ, how needful the grace of the Holy Spirit; if he feels that then he has no stay to rest on — but must seek his refuge in God; no ground of hope except what Christ affords, and no other comfort except what the Spirit imparts — is it too much then to expect, that he who knows that although restored for a season, he is only reprieved, and must yet return to the gates of death, and enter into the world of spirits, and stand at the judgment-seat, and spend an eternity in Heaven or in Hell — that he will, under such solemn impressions, resolve at least to guard against estrangement from God for the time to come — to live a life of faith in the Son of God, and to avoid everything by which the Holy Spirit, to whom he looks for comfort in his dying hour, might be grieved, or induced to withdraw from his soul?

Thus it is, that whether affliction is regarded as a means of *reproof*, or of *instruction* — it should in every case, and, whenever it is duly improved, will lead the believer, to devote himself more entirely and unreservedly to his Master's service.

Before leaving this part of the subject, however, it may be useful to suggest *three necessary cautions*:

The first caution is, that these resolutions of future amendment must not be allowed to prevent or supersede the immediate duty of closing with Christ, and returning to God without delay. The primary and most urgent duty of every man, in such circumstances, is to embrace the free offer of the Gospel; to commit his soul into Christ's hands, and to have immediate recourse to God. And if this first duty be neglected or deferred, all his good resolutions are of no avail, and may even be dangerous. It is to be feared that, in the time of trouble, *some are prone to substitute resolutions as to future amendment in place of an immediate conversion*. They resolve that, if God would but spare them, they will lead a new life, and forsake their former sins, and attend more diligently to the means of grace. They are in danger of supposing that *this* is a sufficient evidence of repentance, while, if they would but examine the state of their hearts, they could not fail to be conscious that they have had no earnest fellowship with God; that they have made no practical return to him; that they have not as yet deliberately and solemnly surrendered themselves into the Savior's hands, and that they are really as much estranged in heart from God and his spiritual service as they were before.

It is possible, too, that in such circumstances, they may be influenced to a certain extent by self-righteous views; *they may be looking to their future amendment as a means of qualifying them for drawing near to God, or of recommending them to his favorable regard*. If such is the case with any in the time of trouble, they must bear to be reminded:

First, that they are leaving the salvation of their souls to depend on a mere contingency; they may or they may not recover; and should they leave their salvation to depend on something that they mean to do after their recovery, they incur the most fearful peril, for God may be pleased to take them away.

Secondly, that there is absolutely no reason for this postponement and delay; for the fullness of all Gospel privilege is *now* placed at their acceptance; the warrant of faith is as plain, and the ground of faith is as strong, and the offer of salvation as free. God is just as merciful a Judge, Christ just as great a Savior, the Spirit just as benignant a Comforter — the throne of grace is just as accessible, and their reconciliation just as possible, *now*, as it ever can be, even should they be spared.

And thirdly, that while their possible death, at an early period, should shut them up to the necessity of an immediate return to God, their future amendment is neither precluded nor prejudiced — but on the contrary, can only be effectually secured and promoted by this initial change. While its necessity does not arise, in any measure, from its presumed efficacy in qualifying them for, or recommending them to, God's favor — but solely from its inseparable connection with a scriptural faith; from its being a fruit and token of a change of heart, and as such, an evidence of present grace, and a preparation for future glory.

Our vows and resolutions, then, are not sincere, and they may be dangerous and fatal — if they supersede or prevent the discharge of our immediate duty — to close with Christ, and to return to God with our whole hearts, and without delay.

The *second caution* which we would suggest is, that in forming resolutions at that solemn season, we are not called upon to bind ourselves to any exercises or observances, other than such as are of universal and permanent obligation, and that we should look chiefly to the weightier matters of the law.

There are two kinds of vows:

The *first* class consists in a recognition of what was previously and ever, must be our duty — independently of our vow, and a sincere resolution to discharge it.

The *second* kind of vow consists in a voluntary engagement to do some particular service, or to abstain from some particular indulgence, in token of our gratitude to God, or with a view to our own good, or that of our fellow-men; but respecting which, there is no express precept or prohibition, defining our duty in the Word of God.

By the former, a previous and permanent obligation is recognized. By the latter, a new and special obligation is created. In the one case, we conform to God's will — in the latter, we make a free-will offering.

When a believer resolves, in the hour of trouble . . .

that whatever others do — he will serve the Lord;
that he will walk in all the commandments of the Lord blameless;
that he will make the salvation of his soul his chief concern, and God's glory his highest end;
that he will take God's Word as the rule of his life;
that he will commit his soul into Christ's hands, and continue to trust in him from first to last;
that he will pray more frequently and more earnestly;
that he will keep himself unspotted from the world;
that he will guard especially against those sins which do most easily beset him — he is not creating any new obligations, but only recognizing such as are of universal and permanent obligation. Now, this is his primary duty; and these weightier matters of the law, which are common to all Christians, ought to have the first place in his thoughts.

It is not uncommon, however, for a person who conceives himself to be in imminent danger, and whose conscience becomes alarmed — to adopt a different course. Neglecting or shrinking from the great immediate duty of surrendering his heart entirely to God, and, even when he resolves on amendment, omitting the weightier matters of the law — he seeks to *pacify his conscience*, and perhaps also to

propitiate God — by resolving on some *external service* — the founding of an hospital, or the building of a school, or the endowment of a church, or a costly donation to the poor.

Now we do not object to these and similar purposes, provided they proceed from Christian principle, and are the free expressions of gratitude to God, and charity to man. But let it never be forgotten that all this may be *vowed*, and not only vowed — but *done* by a man, whose conscience is ill at ease, while his heart is not right with God! And if this is designed or used as a substitute for thorough conversion, it is an *opiate* that may lull the conscience to rest, without any real change either in his spiritual condition or his eternal prospects.

The *third caution* which we would suggest is, that in forming your resolutions, you should *beware of relying on your own strength, or of trusting to your own good intentions.*

So prone are men to this fatal error, that Christian ministers who have had most experience in dealing with the sick, have very generally been led to attach little importance to any *resolutions* that may be expressed; and even to regard them, when uttered without an express reference to God's sustaining grace, with a certain degree of jealousy, as indications of a mind not yet thoroughly impressed with a sense of its own helplessness.

If, in vowing to the Lord, you acknowledge the authority of God's Word, when it calls you to repentance and amendment of life, why should you not acknowledge the authority of the same Word, when it tells you of your spiritual weakness, and urges you to seek the grace of the Holy Spirit? Yield at once to this humbling but beneficial truth! It will save you from many fruitless efforts, and prevent many painful disappointments, and set you at once on a path of cheerful obedience, hopeful activity, and progressive improvement.

The doctrine of your own spiritual helplessness, when received as it ought to be, in connection with the doctrine of the Spirit's grace — so far from depressing the mind, will encourage, and animate, and strengthen it. For then only does the believer feel that he has a sure warrant of hope, and a solid pledge of his final perseverance — when, sensible of his own weakness, he can say from the heart, "my sufficiency is of God!" And when he can enter into the meaning of the apostle's statement, "When I am weak, then am I strong;" — weak in myself — but strong in God my strength.

"It is in vain," said the dejected Luther to Staupitz, when he was passing through that severe mental conflict which prepared the Reformation, "that I make a promise to God; sin is always too strong for me." "Oh! my friend," answered Staupitz, looking back on his own experience, "I have vowed to the Holy God more than a thousand times that I would lead a holy life, and never have I kept my vow! I now make no more vows, for I know well I shall not keep them. If God will not be *merciful* to me for Christ's sake, and grant me a happy death when I leave this world, I cannot, with all my vows and good works, stand before him. I must perish!"

2. We learn from the Psalmist's example, that it is the duty of believers often to remember and review the resolutions which they made in the day of trouble, and especially to perform them unto the Lord, when he is graciously pleased to give them an opportunity of thus testifying their sincerity. Their duty in such a case is so self-evident that no argument can be required to convince any conscience of its imperative obligation. If they were right in forming these resolutions — then surely they must be wrong in forgetting or in failing to fulfill them!

And yet, alas! how often is it otherwise with the professing people of God? How many lamentable examples are there in the visible church, of men whose consciences have been alarmed by the terrors of the Lord in the day of trouble, and whose hearts have been apparently impressed with the most solemn convictions, while they were

agitated by the prospect of death; who have then prayed as in an agony, and lamented their past unprofitableness, and resolved, and even expressed their resolution to an attending minister, to live henceforth, if God should spare them, as they had never lived before; but who, when *God's gracious respite* came to them, and they were raised from a bed of sickness, and restored to the fresh air and the congenial sunshine, and the sweet society of friends, and the ordinary business of life — have gradually lost every sacred and solemn impression, and neglected again their Bibles and their prayers, and become as much strangers to God and religion as if they had never felt their dependence on his grace, and never acknowledged their obligations to his service!

"When God began killing them — they finally sought him. Again and again they tested God's patience and provoked the Holy One of Israel. They did not remember his power and how he rescued them from their enemies." (Psalm 78.) The aggravated guilt of such conduct may be illustrated by various considerations, which we shall briefly state, with the view of leading those who may be conscious that they are already chargeable with it to serious consideration and repentance, and also of preventing others from falling into so grievous a course of defection.

(1.) Let it be considered, then, that their *unfulfilled resolutions are a proof that their afflictions, however numerous, and severe, and protracted — have not as yet been sanctified to them.* Nay, that the very end and design of their trials has been frustrated, and that they come within the range of that fearful warning, "He who being often reprov'd and hardens his neck — shall suddenly be cut off, and that without remedy." And is it, can it be — a light matter to frustrate the end of affliction?

That potent medicine is administered to us by an unerring Physician, for the cure of our moral diseases, for the renovation of our spiritual health. And is there no danger of its being changed, by our carelessness and folly, into deadly poison? It was the fearful

aggravation of Pharaoh's guilt that his heart was hardened by God's judgments, and by the non-fulfillment of his own promises. So is it with every professing Christian who vows unto the Lord in the time of trouble — and, on his recovery, fails to perform his vow.

Affliction, thus mis-improved, cannot accomplish any of its great uses, either as a means of preparing us for future trials, or as a means of strengthening us for future temptations, or as a preparation for more extensive usefulness, for the hour of death, or for admission into glory. Its utility for these ulterior purposes, depends on its immediate effect in bringing us nearer to God, and leading us to devote ourselves, now, and unreservedly, to his service.

If we neglect for a time to fulfill the holy resolutions which we have been led to form while under the discipline of adversity, what evidence have we that our afflictions have been sanctified to us? What reason have we not, on the contrary, to believe that their end has been frustrated, and that God may say of us as he did of his ancient people, "Why should you be stricken any more? You will only revolt more and more!" (Isaiah 1.5.)

(2.) For let it be considered, that *unfulfilled vows indicate*, not only a forgetfulness of the obligations by which we had, in such solemn circumstances, bound ourselves — but also *the loss of those deep and serious impressions of divine things, which then prompted us to resolve on a life of new obedience*. These impressions, in which our vows originated, must have been effaced or sadly impaired — if our vows are forgotten or left unfulfilled on our restoration to health. Can we be supposed to have the same realizing views . . .

of God, and of our relation to him,
of the solemnities of death and judgment and eternity,
of the transcendent importance of salvation, and
of the unspeakable value of the soul —
now, when we are making light of our resolutions and

engagements, as we had then, when, under these solemn impressions, we were constrained to vow unto the Lord?

And yet, what reason can be assigned for this change?

Is God less holy or less just — less omniscient or less almighty now, than then?

Are we more independent of him in health than we were in sickness?

Is he not still our *Preserver*, and will he not before long be our Judge?

Is *death* less inevitably certain?

Is *judgment* less awful?

Is *eternity* less vast?

Is the salvation of our souls less important, or the blood of Christ less precious, or the grace of the Spirit less needful now, than before?

And why, then, when the realities of religion remain of the same permanent and unchangeable magnitude, should our views of them become so dim and so uninfluential? Why, if it is not that our hearts have never been seriously and thoroughly surrendered to God, can we so soon and so thoughtlessly forsake him on the return of temporal health and prosperity?

(3.) Let it be considered too, that *our unfulfilled vows are a proof that we are not now disposed to act in the spirit of our former prayers*. In the day of trouble, we may have prayed with strong crying and tears. When the terrors of death were before us, we found that we had no refuge but in God — and we felt that if we could only come near to him, and order our cause before him, we might yet be safe. But, at that solemn season, we did not pray only for our

recovery — no, we felt that the alternative was forced upon our thoughts, of recovery or death. And as the former was then doubtful, oh! did we not pray most earnestly, for pardoning mercy, for renewing and sanctifying grace, for everything that was needful to make us fit for the inheritance of the saints in light? Now, God has been graciously pleased to disappoint our fears — he has granted that recovery which was then so doubtful.

And what is the result? Are we as solicitous now as we then were, for those spiritual blessings which we supplicated with so much earnestness, and without which we knew we must perish? How can we be so, if we allow our vows and engagements to stand unfulfilled? Do we not, by this negligence, evince an estrangement of the heart from God? Do we not practically abandon the pursuit of those spiritual blessings which then were so precious to us? Do we not virtually retract and recall the prayers which were then offered up?

(4.) Let it be considered, that *our unfulfilled vows are monuments of the deepest ingratitude*. God has been good to us, good beyond our most hopeful expectations. He has delivered our *eyes* from tears, our *feet* from falling, and our *souls* from death. He has turned our mourning into dancing, and "given us beauty for ashes." In the day of trouble he supported us, administering the bounties of his providence, and the sweeter consolations of his Word. And now he has relieved and restored us from our trouble — and what is the result?

A grateful acknowledgment of his goodness?

A more sweet and delightful communion with him?

A more cheerful and unreserved devotedness of heart to his service?

Alas! so it *ought* to be — but it is not, if already our resolutions and engagements have been violated or forgotten; if we have re-entered the busy world only to renew our former course of life; if now we

return, "like the dog to his vomit, and like the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire?"

What base ingratitude is here! How can we plead that we love God, or that, however much we may rejoice in our recovery, we are really *sensible of God's goodness to us* in that respect, if we allow the resolutions which were formed in the day of trouble, to remain unfulfilled in the day of returning prosperity? Nay, is not this a sad but conclusive proof, that as yet we are animated by mere selfishness — seeing that we were more ready to vow to the Lord when we were afraid of his judgments, than we now are to perform our vows after all our experience of his long-suffering patience and tender mercy? What principle of generous love — what fragment of real piety can exist in the heart — which is only capable of religious impressions through its fears, and not through its affections?

(5.) Let it be considered, that *unfulfilled vows are too plain a proof of insincerity and hypocrisy of heart*. We do not say that every partial declension of piety, occurring after a season of distress, or that every infirmity or sin contracted after such a season — ought to be regarded in this light. Far from it. In the time of trouble, God's people are placed in circumstances which are fitted . . .

to deepen even their impressions of spiritual realities,
to invigorate their faith by imparting a nearer and more realizing view of unseen and eternal things,
and to quicken all the graces of the Christian character.

And even they, on their return to the active business of life, are often constrained to mourn over their decays, and to look back to their experience in affliction as the *sweetest* which they have ever enjoyed.

But while we are careful not "to make the heart of the righteous sad, whom the Lord has not made sad" (Ezekiel 13:22) — we must not "strengthen the hands of the wicked, that he should not return from his wicked way, by promising him life." And it is necessary, therefore,

to say with the utmost faithfulness — that there is too much reason to suspect the *insincerity* and *hypocrisy* of such as vow unto the Lord in the time of trouble — and afterwards neglect or refuse to fulfill their vows.

It is all the more necessary to press this consideration, because such people may have been conscious, in the day of trouble, of such sharp convictions of conscience, such solemn views of death and eternity, such an agonizing commotion of spirit, and such real earnestness in regard to some at least of the subjects of their prayers — as to be in imminent danger of confounding these feelings with that genuine sincerity, and that thorough change of heart which the Gospel requires.

"Were we not sincere," may such people say, "when we felt so deeply, and prayed so earnestly, when our fears were so strong, and our resolutions so holy? We know best how we then felt, and no one will ever convince us that then, at least, we were not sincere!" But will they not bear to be affectionately reminded, that they are liable to be mistaken, and that a mistake on this point must be dangerous, and may be eternally fatal.

Do they remember the solemn testimony of God, "The heart is *deceitful* above all things, and desperately wicked," when they speak thus confidently of the impossibility of their being deceived? Instances of a kind precisely similar to theirs are recorded in the Holy Scriptures — instances both of individuals and of communities, who, in the hour of danger, were as much alarmed, and as much in earnest, as themselves — and yet whose partial and temporary convictions did not amount to a saving change. Witness the case which I have already quoted from the 78th Psalm. Witness again the case of Judah, "Judah has not turned unto me with her whole heart — but insincerely, says the Lord." (Jeremiah 12:10.) And again, the case of Israel, "They have not cried unto me with their heart, when they howled upon their beds." (Hosea 7.14.)

There is much in the time of trouble that may excite an earnestness of desire, which is altogether different from Christian sincerity, and awaken deep convictions of conscience, which must not be mistaken for thorough conversion of heart. The sufferer may be not only *sincere* — but *earnest* and *importunate* for some blessings — while his heart is shut against the reception of a full salvation as it is presented in the Gospel.

He may cry to God for help;
he may earnestly pray for recovery;
he may as earnestly supplicate for the pardon of those sins which lie heavy on his conscience, and for deliverance from that future and eternal punishment which no human mind can deliberately anticipate without aversion and alarm.

In all this he may be sincere and earnest, and yet everything that is purely spiritual in religion may be as distasteful and offensive to him as it ever was!

He may wish for recovery, and yet shrink from present conversion!

He may cry for God's help, when vain is the help of man — and yet have no love for God!

He may pray for pardon, and yet have no affection for the Savior!

He may fear Hell, and yet have no fitness for Heaven.

Now, in such circumstances, and with these feelings, he may vow unto the Lord, that, if he is spared, he will lead a new life, and devote himself to God's service. And if, on his recovery, he shows by his conduct that he has *forgotten*, or that he is now *unwilling* to perform his vows — what other conclusion can we entertain concerning him, than that he either never had a right and scriptural view of the nature and extent of that holy obedience which the Gospel enjoins, or that

he is *justly chargeable with an insincere and hypocritical profession.*

Is it not one of the plainest principles of morals that a man making a lawful vow even to his fellow men, is bound to fulfill it; and if it be not fulfilled, is it the less a proof of guilt, or is that guilt less flagrant and aggravated, by reason of its being made, not to man — but to God?

(6.) Let it be considered, that unfulfilled vows are a sad preparation for our dying hour. That solemn hour must sooner or later arrive. Our present recovery is a *brief respite* — and nothing more. We have been at the gates of death — and have been brought back for a little season. But to these gates we must infallibly return — our feet must yet stumble on the dark mountains — our tabernacle, now restored, must yet crumble into dust. The hour of death is certainly before us — and oh! what a fearful burden must our unfulfilled vows lay upon our conscience when that hour arrives!

Then we may expect that the same solemn impressions, the same deep convictions, the same conflict between hope and fear, will be experienced by us again, as were felt during the pressure of our former distress — unless, indeed, our hearts shall by that time have become hard, and our consciences seared as with a hot iron. And if the same convictions and impressions are then reawakened in our souls — how must they be embittered by the recollection . . .

of vows unfulfilled,
of resolutions violated,
of afflictions misimproved,
of time misspent,
of warnings despised,
of judgment and mercy alike neglected and abused?

True, even in such a case, and at the eleventh hour, the blood of Christ, and the grace of his Spirit, are all-sufficient to save. But

through what a fearful conflict may such a mind pass, before it arrives at settled peace and hope. A great change must be wrought upon it, such a change as will humble it in the very dust, and make it bewail its every sin, and especially its broken vows!

And oh! surely so great a change should not be left to a dying hour, when life is so uncertain, and when every day we spend in carelessness or disobedience is treasuring up for us, if not wrath against the day of wrath — yet bitterness and trials for our bitterest and most trying hour.

These considerations may suffice to show that it is the duty of believers to remember and perform the vows which they have made unto the Lord in the day of trouble, and that they cannot forget or violate them without incurring the most aggravated guilt.

They should be performed *without delay*, "When you make a vow to God, do not delay in fulfilling it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to vow than to make a vow and not fulfill." (Ecclesiastes 5.4, 5.) And they should be performed *cheerfully*, not in the spirit of bondage — but from a principle of love, and in token of gratitude. It is not the mere obligation of the vow which should be regarded — for a man may vow, and afterwards regret that he had done so, and adhere to his pledge in a slavish and servile spirit — such as has nothing in common with the spirit of childlike obedience. But the believer, considering that his holy resolutions and engagements embraced duties which were incumbent on him by divine authority, independently of any act of his own, will perform them cheerfully, from a principle of dutiful *submission*, and in token of his *gratitude* and *love*. His experience of the *Lord's faithfulness* in the time of trouble, and of his *undeserved mercy* in delivering him by his mighty power — will afford ample materials for praise.

And it is in the spirit of praise, that he will perform his vows. He will seek to glorify God, as did the Psalmist, partly by direct acts of thanksgiving, partly also by testifying to others what God had

wrought, and calling them to unite with him in admiring God's faithfulness, and wisdom, and love. "Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will declare what he has done for my soul." (Psalm 66.16.) "I will extol you, O Lord, for you have lifted me up; and have not made my foes to rejoice over me. O Lord my God, I cried unto you, and you have healed me. O Lord, you have brought up my soul from the grave — you have kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit." (Psalm 30.1-3.) "You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness; to the end that my glory may sing praise to you, and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks unto you forever." (Psalm 30.11.)

"A writing of Hezekiah king of Judah after his illness and recovery: I said, "In the prime of my life must I go through the gates of death and be robbed of the rest of my years?" I said, "I will not again see the LORD, the LORD, in the land of the living; no longer will I look on mankind, or be with those who now dwell in this world. Like a shepherd's tent my house has been pulled down and taken from me. Like a weaver I have rolled up my life, and he has cut me off from the loom; day and night you made an end of me. I waited patiently till dawn, but like a lion he broke all my bones; day and night you made an end of me. I cried like a swift or thrush, I moaned like a mourning dove. My eyes grew weak as I looked to the heavens. I am troubled; O Lord, come to my aid!" But what can I say? He has spoken to me, and he himself has done this. I will walk humbly all my years because of this anguish of my soul. Lord, by such things men live; and my spirit finds life in them too. You restored me to health and let me live. Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish. In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction; you have put all my sins behind your back. For the grave cannot praise you, death cannot sing your praise; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living — they praise you, as I am doing today; fathers tell their children about your faithfulness. The LORD will save me, and we will sing with stringed instruments all the days of our lives in the temple of the LORD." (Isaiah 38.9-20.)

Christian Submission to God's Sovereignty

"Submit yourselves therefore to God" James 4:7

Submission is, on the part of man, the proper counterpart and the due acknowledgment of God's sovereignty. His sovereignty is alike supreme and universal — and is included in the simplest idea which we can form of God as God. He is self-existent and almighty, and alike *independent* — therefore, of all his creatures, and able to control them. As their *Creator* and *Preserver*, he has a right of property in them. As their *Governor* and *Judge*, he has a supreme jurisdiction over them.

This supreme and unlimited sovereignty is, accordingly, ascribed to God in every part of Scripture. We read "That he is God, and there is none besides him!" "The most high God, possessor of Heaven and earth." "Of whom, and through whom, and to whom are all things." "For whose pleasure they are and were created." "The Lord has made all things for himself." "In his hand is the soul of every living thing." "We are the clay — and he is the potter." "The God of the spirits of all flesh." "His counsel shall stand, and who will do all his pleasure." "He works all things after the counsel of his own will." "He gives not account of any of his matters." "The Most High does according to his will in the army of Heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What are you doing?" Such are the strong testimonies of Scripture, and, coincident as these testimonies are with the dictates of enlightened reason — they cannot be disputed or denied without virtually abandoning the idea of God altogether.

For what is God, if he is not sovereign and supreme? Can we conceive of him as *subordinate* — or as *limited* either in his power, or in his authority — or as *controlled* and regulated by any other consideration than the counsel of his own will? As it is impossible to conceive of a Supreme Being who is not possessed of universal sovereignty and almighty power — so these infinite perfections must be ascribed to God. And I see not why we who know God's character should be so averse, as many are, to acknowledge this in its full extent, and are so anxious to *limit* the Holy One of Israel.

Such *sovereignty*, indeed, as the Bible ascribes to him, and as is necessarily involved in any idea that we can form of a Supreme Being, could not be contemplated apart from the *moral perfections* of his nature — without apprehension and fear. And even when these perfections are taken into view, it is not astonishing that lost sinners, who have so much reason to fear that they are the objects of his displeasure, should still be unwilling to think of God's sovereignty in connection with his *inflexible justice* and his *almighty power*. As sinners, they must have many a misgiving of heart, when the idea of God's sovereignty is vividly presented to them, so long as they are ignorant of the way in which *all his attributes* may be glorified in their salvation.

But surely Christian believers who know the character of God, as a being possessed of every moral perfection, and who know, furthermore, that in Christ, he can be "the just God, and yet the Savior of sinners" — should have the less reluctance to admit, in the most unqualified sense, the doctrine of his sovereignty, in proportion as they feel assured that such a sovereignty may be safely exercised by such a good and gracious Being. And if, notwithstanding, they shrink from acknowledging it, and are conscious of a disposition to evade the evidence by which it is confirmed, they have reason to fear, that they have not as yet acquired such confidence in God's moral perfections, as would enable them to feel that they are safe in his hands.

It should be matter of serious inquiry, whether their repugnance to God's sovereignty arises out of a mere reluctance to admit that one prerogative of the divine nature — or whether it does not rather indicate a distrust of those moral perfections which, whenever they are duly apprehended, should banish all unworthy misgivings, whatever may be the extent of God's power. For why should Christian men mistrust God, or apprehend any evil from his supremacy? Is he not . . .

omniscient in knowledge,
and unerring in wisdom,
and unchangeable in justice, and goodness, and truth?

Supreme as he is, is he not fit to be "the confidence of all the ends of the earth" — and is it not still true of him, that "the judge of all the earth will do right?"

Are we apprehensive of any undue exercise of power, or of any capricious use of prerogative on the part of Him, whose nature is holy, and whose name is love? Or can we really imagine that we would be in a safer or better state — were God's sovereignty less absolute or less universal than it is? Do we not know that the order of the whole universe depends on its being under the government of one God, and under the control of his sovereign will — and that were his supremacy over it supposed to be abandoned, we would have no security for our happiness, and no stay for our hopes, other than what might be furnished by the vicissitudes of *chance*, or the operation of a *blind fate*?

I have thus adverted to the sovereignty of God, as the ground and reason of the submission which is here enjoined, partly because that duty cannot be fulfilled without reference to this divine prerogative, and partly also because there is a *spurious submission*, which has in it nothing of the nature of the Christian grace — but which is not infrequently mistaken for it.

It may help us to distinguish or discriminate between the false and the true, between the spurious and the genuine — if we bear in mind that the submission here enjoined is submission to God — not a sullen and reluctant succumbing to blind fate — but an intelligent and cheerful resignation to the divine will. In order to this, nothing can be either more necessary or more effectual than that we should, in the first instance, have a clear apprehension of God's supremacy, and submit our understandings to the full impression of *his rights as a sovereign*.

Without this we may submit to circumstances which we cannot alter, or to events which we cannot control — but we cannot be said to submit to God. His hand may not be acknowledged, in the dispensations of providence, nor any homage paid to his sovereign will, as the disposer of all events. And, if this is the case, we may rather be said to submit to *fate* or to *fortune* — than to submit ourselves to him, "who works all things after the counsel of his own will."

But if we have once acquired a clear apprehension of God's prerogative as a sovereign, and surrendered our understandings to the full impression of his supremacy — we shall be prepared to see how reasonable a thing it is, in all circumstances, and at all times — to submit ourselves to God; the very fact of his sovereignty being a sufficient reason for submission, whatever may be the occasion on which we are called to exercise it.

Indeed, the duty of submission is so inseparable from the fact of God's supremacy, that whenever the latter is duly considered, the former will be regarded as a most reasonable service, and everything like *murmuring* or *complaining* will assume the appearance of resisting the *will*, and questioning the *authority* of God himself.

Trusting that you will bear in mind the great principle which we have stated, and a right apprehension of which is the source and spring of all genuine submission — I proceed to illustrate some of the leading

subjects and occasions, with reference to which you are called to the exercise of this duty:

1. We are called to submit ourselves to God in respect to the various allotments and dispensations of his providence. By the allotments of providence — we mean the *situations* in which we are individually placed. By the dispensations of providence — we mean the *events* which, in our several conditions, befall us. The former has reference to our general circumstances in the world — the latter has reference to peculiar and occasional occurrences.

The allotments of providence are very various; as is evident when we reflect on the different lots of different men.

Some are born, as it were, to affluence and prosperity — others to poverty and hard toil.

Some are, from their very infancy, surrounded with every advantage that can tend to promote either their physical comfort, or their mental culture — others grow up without any of these advantages, and in a state of constant exposure to every evil influence.

Some are destined to pass through the world, almost unnoticed and unknown — while others occupy a prominent place in society, and are the objects of general observation.

Some are called to stations of influence and authority — while many are subjected to the control of a master's will, and bound over to servile obedience.

Such and so various are the lots of different men. And to one who sees no unseen power at work in the world, and who speculates on the present aspect of its affairs, without reference to the divine will, as if the throne of Heaven were vacant — there is much, unquestionably, in its present condition, which might awaken in his mind a feeling of regret, and even provoke a bitter sense of wrong. For he cannot fail to discover that men are not here dealt with

according to the moral merit of their conduct; that among the most indigent and forlorn, there are many of the best specimens of mankind — and among the prosperous, many of the worst. And it is apt to excite a feeling of indignation when he observes that, sometimes by the very indulgence of vice one man prospers, while by the very exercise of virtue, another is impoverished.

It cannot be surprising that, on contemplating such a state of things, the man who omits all reference to God's will in the matter, should be disposed to murmur and complain — or that he should even become dissatisfied with the present order of things, especially if, in the absence of a higher cause, he should *ascribe the evils which exist solely to the agency of human power*, to the machinations or the policy of particular orders of men.

It cannot, I say, be astonishing, that this should be the result, when we find the Psalmist himself bewildered and perplexed for a season, by these apparent disorders: "As for me, my feet were almost gone, my steps had well-near slipped; for I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches. Truly I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence. For all day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning!" (Psalm 73:2-3; 12-14.) Such were the views and feelings which the aspect of society awakened in the mind of a devout man under the old dispensation — and, as matters now stand, the same views and feelings may be awakened in our own, if we do not recognize *God's hand* in the disposal of our several lots, and bear in mind the great purposes of his present government.

But the idea of a presiding providence, ordering all things according to the counsels of unerring wisdom, and with a view to the ultimate manifestation of his own glory, and the permanent, nay, the everlasting good of his redeemed people — that one idea harmonizes all apparent irregularities, and teaches us to regard them as *parts of a vast system, whose glorious outcomes will be unfolded in eternity*.

And it was by recurring to this elevating consideration, that the Psalmist's mind was released from all its perplexities: "When I thought to know this," says he, "it was too painful for me, until I went into the sanctuary of God, then understood I their end!" "Nevertheless, I am continually with you — you have held me by my right hand. You shall guide me with your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. My flesh and my heart may fail — but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

It is by such considerations that the mind may be brought to a state of *quiet and even cheerful submission*, in whatever situation of life we may be placed.

We are too apt to overlook God's sovereignty in this matter, and to ascribe existing evils to the operation of *secondary causes*. I shall not stop to inquire how far such causes do operate, under God's government; nor enter at all on the perplexing question: How many of our present disorders arise from the errors of human policy, or the defects of human law? Doubtless there is much room for improvement in both; everything of human origin, or under human administration, being marked with the *imperfection* which cleaves to our fallen nature. But it is sufficient for us to know, that no evil of whatever kind could have befallen us — had we not sunk universally into a state of sin; and that even were all practicable ameliorations in the condition of society effected. These would not annihilate the differences which exist between man and man, nor supersede the necessity of still cherishing a meek and submissive spirit — for it is not a fortuitous accident — but a fixed part of the present system of things, that such differences in the lots of different men should exist, as the distinction between rich and poor, master and servant, appears to be a permanent one. And so long as there is any difference, there must be room for murmuring and complaining on the part of those who think themselves aggrieved — and for submission and resignation on the part of such as acknowledge the providence and sovereignty of God.

But we shall err, if we imagine that those only are called to exercise submission to God's will in this matter, who are tempted by reason of their indigence or obscurity to complain of the hardness of their lot. There is the same room, and the same reason too, for submission, although in a different way, in the case of those who are favored with worldly prosperity. It will require no argument, indeed, to persuade them that they should submit to the honor and the emoluments, which they enjoy; for, however defective they may be in *contentment* and *thankfulness*, and however ambitious to rival or surpass those that are still above them in the world — they are well enough pleased that their condition is better than that of many around them. But, they do not duly acknowledge God's sovereignty, nor submit to his will, if, besides enjoying the gifts of his providence, they are not careful to *apply* them to the *ends* for which they were bestowed, and to *use* them after the *method* of his appointment.

As God's sovereignty bestows — so God's will should regulate the application of the peculiar benefits which they enjoy. He has committed *wealth*, and *honor*, and *power* into the hands of some, as *his stewards* — not for their own personal aggrandizement, nor with a view to their selfish gratification — but in trust, for the benefit of others. And theirs will be a solemn reckoning at the last account, if they have hid their talents in a napkin, or refused to apply them to the ends which he has enjoined.

"Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain — but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share." (1 Timothy 6.17, 18.) Such is the rule of God's Word; and *obedience* to that rule constitutes one important branch of that *submission* to God, which should have reference not merely to the allotments of his providence — but to the declared *purposes* and *ends* for which they are designed.

The same submission is called for in reference to the occasional occurrences or dispensations by which the general lots of men are diversified in the present state. While it is certain that the lots of men are widely different, it is equally certain that, *in every man's lot*, there are seasons which call for the exercise of submission. We err if we imagine that the prosperous are uniformly happy: a *crown* is often lined with thorns; *wealth* is often embittered by sickness, by disease, by disappointment, or by family bereavement. And when such trials come, the possessors of worldly distinction are as much to be *pitied* as the poorest of their brethren.

Now in every dispensation we are called to "submit ourselves to God;" to recognize *his hand* in the event; to ascribe it, not to the caprice of fate or chance or fortune, nor to the mere operation of second causes — but to the sovereign will of him . . .

who rules over all,
who gives — and who takes away,
who lifts up — and who casts down, and
who works all things after the counsel of his own will.

This *intelligent and reverential submission to God's will*, is widely different from the feeling which is often expressed in seasons of trial, in such words as these: "We must submit." "It cannot be helped." "It is useless to complain." A *Stoic* might thus speak!

But a Christian should speak better. He should not only see, that the event could neither be prevented by his power, nor guarded against by his wisdom — but he should see in it . . .

an effect of God's power,
a manifestation of God's will,
an expression of God's supremacy.

And then, he would feel not only the *uselessness* — but the *sinfulness* of complaining; and not only the hard necessity of submission — but the holy duty of submission.

But there are dispensations of a very peculiar kind. Some of the sorest trials of God's people arise out of the state and conduct of their relatives and friends. When one who is near and dear to them exhibits no evidence of his being the subject of divine grace; and still more, when he manifests by his conduct, the prevailing power of depravity — they cannot fail to be deeply concerned, and it is alike their duty and their privilege to make his conversion a subject of frequent and fervent prayer, and to hope even to the end. But should he be cut off without any apparent change — oh! then there arises a tumult of grief — it may be, a tempest of passion, which faith itself may find it difficult to subdue.

How difficult in such a case to acknowledge God's sovereignty, and to acquiesce in his appointment! And how prone is the believer himself to question the truth or the rectitude of God's electing grace! He may see that God's sovereign election is clearly revealed; and that it is confirmed by the very different experience of individuals, all equally depraved, and exposed to the same temptations. Yet his mind recoils from it, when it is considered in connection with those who are his own beloved relatives and friends.

But, in the hour of calm reflection, he will pray, *first* that, even in this trying case, he may be enabled to "submit himself to God." *Secondly*, that he may be enabled to take a right and scriptural view of the subject; to remember that God's will, although sovereign, is not capricious — but takes counsel, as it were, from all his attributes and perfections that, although it is expressly declared that personal merit is not the reason of his electing love — yet he is not in any unjust sense, "a respecter of persons;" that although no *reason* is assigned for his procedure, such a reason as satisfies omniscient wisdom and infinite justice and love — does unquestionably exist; and that, while it is not capable of being discovered or understood now — it will one day be declared, when all his people will be able to say, "You, O Lord, are righteous, because you have judged thus;" — that his repugnance to the Scriptural doctrine implies a lack, not only of due submission

to God's will — but a due confidence in his character, as if it were unsafe to ascribe sovereignty to him.

Every objection to God's sovereignty is to be met by the Apostle's answer, "Who are you, O man, that replies against God?" A disposition to quarrel with God's sovereignty, when viewed in connection with our relatives and friends, implies that we presume to have more equity and more love than God, or that we are as yet little impressed with the supreme duty of adhering to God at all hazards, according to that saying, "Whoever loves father, or mother, or sister, or brother, more than me, is not worthy of me" "Be still and know that I am God." "Will not the judge of all the earth do right." "It is the Lord, let him do as seems him good."

Eli who spoke these last words, affords an example, in this respect, to all believers. His sons were wicked, "they made themselves vile;" and "they made the Lord's people transgress;" and on account of their profligacy, God promised that he would "cut them off." Eli was himself blamed for "not *restraining* them;" although he had not failed at least to *reprove* them, and he was a large sharer in the bitterness of their punishment. Yet he received the sentence meekly; and, in the spirit of entire submission, he was enabled to say, even in that most bitter hour, "It is the Lord, let him do what seems good to him." (1 Samuel 12:18.)

2. We have seen that, *in the season of affliction, we are specially called to the exercise of submission in reference to the dispensations of God's providence.* But we must not stop short at this point; nor is this the only application of the lesson which affliction is designed and fitted to teach. That lesson is a very general and comprehensive one, and extends to every other subject on which God's will is made known.

When God takes us into his own hand, and visits us with disease, or poverty, we feel how vain a thing it is to struggle against his almighty power, and how right a thing it is to submit to his sovereign will. But

these dispensations of his providence are fitted and designed to produce a spirit of entire and unreserved submission — submission, not only to his providential dealings with us — but also to every other expression of his sovereign will. And thus we are furnished with a safe and sure test by which we may ascertain whether we are really resigned or not.

Many, yielding to the bare necessity of their condition, give themselves up as passive victims to suffering and death, and imagine that because they make no murmuring complaints, and offer no vain resistance — they are submitting themselves to God. But if they would test the *genuineness* of their resignation to his will — they should inquire whether they have been taught by means of their afflictions to recognize and rest in God's supremacy, to submit themselves to God, in every relation which he bears to them, and in all the respects in which his will has been made known.

They may rest assured that they have not duly submitted to God in any one instance — if they are not thereby prepared to submit to him in every other. And perhaps the stunning stroke of affliction, which impresses us so deeply with a sense of our helplessness, and of our absolute dependence on God's sovereign pleasure — may have been sent, for the purpose of leading to an entire surrender of ourselves into his hands. Yet certainly, it will be productive of no saving benefit, if it leave in our breasts one fragment of cherished repugnance or opposition to his will, to whatever *subject* his determinations may refer, and by whatever *methods* they may be disclosed to us.

This view of the subject leads us to consider an important practical application of the general doctrine. Affliction is designed and fitted to teach the general and comprehensive lesson of submission to God, in every respect in which his will is made known. And if we would test the genuineness of our submission, we must consider how far it is co-extensive with that lesson.

More particularly, we are called to submit to God as our *lawgiver* and *judge*. The law is an expression of God's sovereignty; it derives its power of binding the conscience, not only from the reasonableness of its requirements — but from the authority by which it is enjoined. No one can dispute the obligation of any of its precepts, or refuse submission to them, without impeaching the sovereignty of God. And this holds true alike of the moral and the positive parts of his law. The *moral precepts* are so reasonable in themselves, and so consistent with the dictates of conscience, and so conducive to our own happiness — that, apart from the revealed sanction of God altogether, they might well commend themselves to our observance.

But, even when our conduct is *outwardly* conformable to the letter of the divine law — we do not submit ourselves to God, if we act under the influence of mere prudential consideration, and if we do not obey it from a regard to God's sovereign authority. Thus we may have the *form* of submission, while we are destitute of the *spirit* of submission.

Further, this submission to God's sovereignty, speaking in the law, must be *universal*, and have a reference to *every* intimation of the divine will. The man who really submits to God's authority in one matter, must see it to be equally reasonable to submit to the same authority in every other matter. His obedience will not be regulated by his personal partialities or antipathies, nor confined to those duties which are most pleasing to his natural taste — but co-extensive with the law in all its length and breadth. For the radical principle of obedience, is submission to the supreme will, and in whatever matter, or on whatever occasion that will is made known — it will secure his cheerful compliance.

Whereas he who acts on a different principle, may render an *outward* and *partial* obedience — but cannot be said to "submit himself to God." This is frequently exemplified in the case of those who, professing great respect for the moral precepts of Christianity

— refuse, nevertheless, to observe its positive institutions. They admire, and in part observe, the law, in so far as it enjoins honesty, and prohibits blasphemy, or lying, or impurity — but when it speaks of the holy sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Table, which depend for their obligation, on the sole authority of God, they do not submit themselves to his declared will — but act as if the sovereign of the world had no right to impose or to expect such observances.

God's sovereignty, if it is owned at all, must be owned out and out. Whenever God speaks, he must, as a sovereign, be listened to and obeyed. God is not only the supreme *lawgiver* — but also the sovereign *judge* of all; and his sentence, once pronounced, must be reverently received. I speak not at present of that last, final, and irreversible sentence which he will pronounce on each of us on that day which is, by way of eminence, called *the Day of Judgment*; for, however lightly we may now deal with God, or think of him, there will be no room for levity, and no lack of awe-struck reverence, in the vast assembly, which shall hear that sentence pronounced at the judgment-seat. But I speak of a decision which the *supreme judge* has already pronounced, of a sentence which he has already passed, and which stands on record in the written Word. For, although we are not as yet in a state of retribution, God has been pleased, as it were, to anticipate the final reckoning, and to make known to us, for our warning in a state of trial, and for our benefit in a state of grace — the views and feelings with which, as our sovereign Lord and Judge, he regards our case.

His sentence is a solemn one, and proceeding, as it does, from the Judge of all the earth, it may well impress us with awe. In reference to our natural condition, it is none other than this, "Cursed is every one that continues not in all things written in the Book of the Law to do them." This is God's declared mind and will — and who shall question or gainsay it? Yet, so far from surrendering ourselves to the full impression of that sentence, or submitting with reverence to the decision of a Judge, who can neither err nor deceive — many spurn at it as a revolting falsehood, or cavil against its application to

themselves. But what avails this opposition? We may *rebel* against God's sentence — but that will not *release* us from it. We may argue ourselves into a disbelief of its truth — but that will not alter the word which has gone forth from his mouth.

Surely if this is the judgment of God on our present case, it is useful for us to know the real state of the fact — and as impious as it must be unavailing, to call in question the rectitude of his decision. But thus to yield to the solemn decision of God — to surrender our hearts to the full impression of that fearful sentence, and, above all, to acquiesce in the rectitude and propriety of its application to ourselves — this is one of the hardest parts of that submission which we owe to God. Rather than do so, we shall be glad to have recourse to many a refuge of lies, and we must be driven out of our last stronghold, before we will come to God, and acknowledge that his condemning sentence against us is a just one, and that we cast ourselves absolutely on his sovereign mercy.

Some may imagine that this part of duty, however reasonable in itself, has little connection with the exercises appropriate to a season of affliction. But it is not so. Unless we submit to God's authority as a Lawgiver and Judge, we shall be but ill-prepared to acknowledge the equity and justice of his procedure towards us, and shall not be able to feel the full force of that question, "Why does a living man complain — a man for the punishment of his sins?"

In like manner we are called by affliction to submit ourselves to God's sovereignty, in the method of our SALVATION. In the dispensation of *grace*, not less than in the course of *providence* — God is Sovereign. It belongs to him to prescribe the method and terms of our salvation — and, indeed, to determine whether we are to be saved at all. This follows necessarily from the doctrine which we have already expounded respecting God's judgment on our case; for if we were sinners, and as such, justly subjected to a sentence of condemnation — it is plain that it must be of *God's sovereign mercy alone*, that *any* scheme of salvation has been provided, and that

scheme must be, in all its parts, arranged and ordered according to the counsel of his own will.

Nothing could be more self-evident than this, were it not that we are, through natural pride and perverseness, unwilling to acknowledge God's sovereignty in the matter. We are desirous of finding some ground of right in ourselves, some distinctive peculiarity of character which may put a difference between us and other sinners, and which we may plead as a reason for our acceptance with God. And hence, we do not willingly submit to that *scheme of grace* which God has revealed, and which addresses itself to us only as *sinners*, and calls upon us to place ourselves absolutely at God's mercy.

But *God's sovereignty demands submission*; for "many as are the devices of man's heart, the counsel of the Lord, that shall stand." And what is the counsel of the Lord in this matter? He has devised, and is now carrying into effect a method of salvation, which provides for the pardon of sin, only through the mediation of Jesus Christ. He declares, that "There is no other name given under Heaven among men whereby we can be saved." And furthermore, he has been pleased to connect the enjoyment of their salvation with the exercise of a simple faith. This is the sovereign determination of Almighty God, and we are required to submit ourselves to it, acknowledging . .

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his *right* to prescribe the way,
his *wisdom* in devising, and
his *mercy* in accomplishing our salvation.

Again, God has a method of SANCTIFICATION as well as of pardon. He has declared that we must be sanctified by the agency of the Holy Spirit — by the instrumentality of the truth contained in the Bible — by the diligent use of appointed means, such as Scripture and prayer, and by the patient endurance and due improvement of affliction and trial. These are the means which God has selected for that end, and

we are called to submit ourselves to his sovereign pleasure, and to attempt no other way.

It is the lack of a due regard to God's supremacy which leads us so often to tamper with his appointments, and to forsake the way which he has marked out for us. But if we are once fully impressed with the necessity and the duty of submitting ourselves, in all respects, to God — we will at once comply with his methods, and acquiesce in his arrangements for our good.

I am aware, indeed, that the doctrine of God's sovereignty has sometimes the effect of awakening doubts and apprehensions, such as prevent the sinner from freely embracing the Gospel call. For when that doctrine is viewed in reference to the *subjects* of salvation, as well as in reference to the *method* of salvation — the sinner is apt to argue that he has no warrant to expect salvation, since some only are to be saved. And, in this state of mind, he is sensible of little comfort, even from the glad tidings of great joy.

Yet so far from ascribing these effects to a right apprehension of God's sovereignty in this matter, I am disposed to regard them as a proof that their apprehension of it, or at least their submission to it, is as yet imperfect; and to believe that did they really and cordially own and yield to it, they would be just so much the nearer to a settled ground of peace and hope. For then they would see that they have no refuge anywhere else than in the sovereign mercy of God. They would be led to cast themselves absolutely into his hands, and in the spirit of entire self-resignation, to submit themselves to him.

The most unreserved and unqualified admission of the divine sovereignty does not remove the ground of a sinner's hope, nor can it destroy the warrant of faith. On the contrary, it prepares the mind for receiving salvation, in the only shape in which it is offered — as a free gift. And surely, that can neither be a secure nor a safe ground of hope which depends for its stability, on the limiting of God's prerogative, or the denial of his supremacy. And, in no situation, can

a believer find a securer hope, or a sweeter peace, than when he is conscious, that, in all respects, and without any reserve, he "is submitting himself to God."

These views, important at all times, are peculiarly impressive, in the season of affliction. We then feel that, in one respect at least, we *must* submit to God's will — that we have no means of controlling or counteracting it — that we cannot escape from the *disease*, or the *poverty*, or *death* which he has appointed for us. If we are thus taught, not only the hard necessity — but the *holy duty of resignation* — we shall see the reasonableness of submission to the same divine will, in every other matter in respect to which it may be disclosed. And without this, we may rest assured, that we have not learned the lesson which affliction was designed to teach.

It may be imagined, indeed, that the duty of submitting to God's will in the matter of our *salvation*, has little connection with the exercises that are appropriate to a season of *affliction*. But we may well believe that it is God's *design*, in many of his afflictive dispensations — to lead us to this entire surrender of ourselves into his hands, and that we never can obtain a well-founded and genuine consolation under them, until we yield to that method of salvation which he has revealed in the Gospel.

A Meek and Quiet Spirit

"The ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God" 1 Peter 3:4

The character which is so exquisitely delineated in these few simple words, is not the result of mere natural temperament or constitution — but the product of ripe and mature Christian experience. It is

formed by slow degrees, under the teaching of God's Word and Spirit, and the long-continued discipline of his providence. It is lamentably defective in many, whose personal religion cannot be charitably doubted — and is seldom acquired in the earlier stages of the Christian course. It resembles the mellow flavor and sweetness of fruit which has been fully matured, and is ready to be gathered.

Let me *describe* and *illustrate* the spirit which is here commended; *contrasting* it, as we proceed, with the various dispositions to which it is opposed; and then adduce some reasons and motives fitted to persuade you to the acquirement and cultivation of it.

The spirit here described may be regarded under two distinct aspects:

first, as it has reference to our *piety* towards God;
secondly, as it relates to our charity towards fellow-men.

In the one respect, it ranks under our *religious* duty — in the other, under our *relative* duty.

1. It is obviously a part of our religious duty to cherish at all times a meek and quiet spirit towards GOD. His *Character* should secure our heartfelt reverence, and his *Will* should secure our quiet and unquestioning submission. We should be as little children in God's hands, regarding him as our Father in Heaven, and feeling towards him as a confiding child feels towards a kind parent, whose worth he reveres, whose love he cannot question, and whose will he would not resist for the world.

More particularly, the believer is called to exercise a meek and quiet spirit in reference to **God's Teaching**. He may find, assuredly he shall find, in reading that Word which contains the revelation of God's mind and will, many truths which are too apt, on their being first proposed, to excite his angry opposition, and to raise questions in his mind, such as that of our Lord's followers, "This is a hard saying, who can hear it?" The Christian must learn many a hard

lesson from the mouth of God — many a lesson which is intended for "casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ." (2 Corinthians 10:5.)

And these lessons, including all the fundamental truths of his Word, never can be learned or received unless the mind is brought to yield itself up entirely to God's teaching — until the disciple becomes as a little child, and sits like Mary at the feet of Jesus, hearing his word.

In this respect, a meek and quiet spirit stands opposed to all pride of intellect, and especially to that rebellious temper which is disposed to raise questions and start objections — instead of simply hearing and believing whatever the Lord speaks.

Free inquiry after the truth of God is not forbidden — far from it; but it must be a calm, meek, and submissive thoughtfulness, such as befits the unerring wisdom of our Instructor, and our own ignorance and weakness; an inquiry, whose only object is to ascertain God's truth, and, on its being ascertained, to receive and embrace it — however different it may be from our preconceived opinions, or opposed to our natural prejudices.

Such an inquiry is best and most successfully conducted, when the spirit of a man is thoroughly subdued by a sense of God's majesty, and awed into quiet submission by the conviction of his unerring wisdom. Then, instead of exclaiming in the heat and violence of our exasperated feelings, "This is a hard saying, who can hear it?" or, "Who is the Lord that we should obey him?" — we shall be ready meekly and simply to ask, "What has the Lord said?" or, "Lord, what will you have me to do?"

The believer is called to exercise a meek and quiet spirit in reference to **God's Accusations and Rebukes**. When he reads the Word, and marks the language in which God reproves him of sin; when he considers the humbling view which is there presented of his own

vileness, and the displeasure which God has expressed against him — his proud heart may be too often disposed to question the accuracy of such representations, or, at all events, their application to *himself*. The unrenewed mind cannot endure to have such accusations closely pressed upon it — it spurns with indignation at the charges which God has deliberately stated.

But the disciple, whose mind has been subdued by the grace of God, will listen even to these humbling portions of God's Word, with a meek and quiet spirit. He is satisfied on the one hand, that God, as he cannot err or be deceived, can have no disposition to inflict unnecessary pain; and on the other side, that, as his sin must be infinitely more heinous in God's sight than it can be in his own, so it is beneficial for him to know what God thinks of it; and wise to look on it in the same light.

When others rail at the Word of God — he is found meekly reading it. While others are loud in declaiming against the passages which are offensive to their taste — he is quietly digesting them, and imbibing their wholesome truth into the very frame of his spirit. While others seek to adapt and accommodate God's Word to their own likings — he is meekly and quietly seeking to conform his character to God's Word. In this respect, a meek and quiet spirit stands opposed to pride, to self-righteousness, to vain-glory; it begins in penitence, and ends in habitual humility of heart.

The believer is called to exercise a meek and quiet spirit, in reference to **God's Dispensations Towards Him**. In the course of God's providence, he may be raised to great prosperity — or reduced to deep poverty and distress. In either case, he sees no reason to change his state of mind — he is meek and quiet still.

When an unsanctified man is elevated, especially if it is suddenly and unexpectedly, to affluence, or honor, or rank — he is too apt to swell into self-importance, as if a little gold were sufficient to give him new

dignity, or a little honor to add to his intrinsic worth: "they grow fat as the heifer at grass, and neigh like stallions," (Jeremiah 50:11.)

But the true disciple, while he undervalues none of God's mercies, will join trembling with his mirth. And while he is surrounded with prosperity, will remember chiefly the additional responsibilities which are thereby imposed on him: his own weakness for so great a trust, and the solemn account which he must sooner or later render. And on the very pinnacle of worldly joy, he will seek to cherish a meek and quiet spirit towards God.

But meekness is more peculiarly appropriate in the season of adversity and trial. Such seasons every Christian has experienced, and many yet expect. It is through great tribulation that we must enter the kingdom. If all men are born to trouble — the Christian is doubly sure of his share, for "whom the Lord loves he chastens, and scourges every son whom he receives." At such seasons, and especially if the trial is very severe, or suddenly sent, or long continued — the disciple is in God's school, learning a practical lesson of no easy attainment, even the lesson of meekness and quietness towards God. His clearest duty is that of resigned submission, of uncomplaining acquiescence in God's will.

But alas! the self-evident clearness of the *duty* is far from insuring the disposition to obey! Instead of meekness towards God — there is too often an ill-concealed and ever struggling rebellion against his will. And instead of quietness — there is too often a querulous complaining, a fretful utterance of impatient feelings, equally dishonoring to God and injurious to his own peace of mind. God may say of many a professing disciple as he did of Ephraim, "I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus — you have chastised me and I was chastised — as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke," (Jeremiah 31:18.) Or as he said of the Israelites, on another occasion, "Your sons have fainted, they lie at the head of all the streets, as a wild bull in a net!" (Isaiah 51:20.)

A bullock unaccustomed to the yoke, or a wild bull caught in a net — are but too faithful emblems of many when they are first seized with affliction. They struggle against, and would gladly burst the bands which God has laid upon them — and when they cannot extricate themselves by any violent effort, they are too apt to sink into the habit of grieving and murmuring under their trials.

It is not astonishing that this should be the case with *worldly* men — for they have no resource except what worldly peace and prosperity can afford. But it ought not to be the case with God's people, who know that every painful dispensation with which they are visited, proceeds from unerring wisdom and infinite love, and that it is a part of that discipline by which God is seeking to purify them, and prepare them for Heaven.

It is long, however, even in a Christian mind, before *the habit of unquestioning submission to God's will* is formed. In the earlier stages of his course, the believer is apt . . .

to be impatient of the cross which he is appointed to bear;
to question either the necessity or the wisdom of its being imposed upon him, and
to doubt the love of God when it is manifested in the way of chastisement. But as he advances, and in proportion as he is suitably exercised by his affliction, his mind is subdued. He feels that God has taken the management of his case into His own hands, and by ways which seem hard or mysterious — but which are really beneficial, is seeking to "humble him, and to prove him, and to show him what is in his heart." He learns by experience — what he was slow to learn by the mere reading of the Word, however clearly it was there set before him. And thus he comes to cherish habitually a "meek and quiet spirit" — a spirit which neither disputes the necessity, nor questions the wisdom, nor doubts the love of God's dispensations towards him — but which leads him to place himself entirely in God's hands, to be dealt with according to His good pleasure, not doubting,

that "all things shall work together for good to those who love Him, and are the called according to His purpose." He feels the pressure of affliction, and may even be stunned by its unexpected stroke — but still he says with the Psalmist, "I was silent; I would not open my mouth, for You are the one who has done this!" Psalm 39:9

Herein he resembles his blessed Lord, who was "meek and lowly in heart." "He was oppressed and he was afflicted — yet he opened not his mouth. He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth." (Isaiah 53:7.)

2. The spirit which is here commended, may be viewed in another aspect, as it has respect to our fellow-men. The same meek and quiet spirit which leads the believer to submit to God, as his Father, will also lead him to act towards his fellow-men as brethren, in such a way as to give no unjust *offence* — to do no real *injury* — or to occasion no unnecessary *uneasiness* to any one of them. I do not mean to say that any Christian ever did or ever will pass through the world without offending the prejudices, or exciting the enmity and opposition of worldly men. No, for then "the offence of the Cross had ceased;" "it is enough for the servant that he be as his Master, and the disciple as his Lord." If they were offended by the perfect Master, much more may they be offended in his weak followers, who "are as sheep in the midst of wolves."

But while they ought not to shrink from duty, by reason of the opposition which they must encounter in the discharge of it — they should seek to maintain throughout, not a restless, irritable, and clamorous temper — but a meek and quiet spirit; a spirit actuated not by hatred — but by love; not shrinking from opposition when it must be encountered — but still less courting it or stirring it up; not delighted with the world's noisy strife — but with the quiet delights of privacy and peace.

This meek and quiet spirit should pervade all our interactions with others. The believer is called to exercise it in reference to the dispositions and tempers of those with whom he associates. These may often be irritable and violent; he may be scorned and reviled; he may be regarded with jealousy, or envy, or malice. And even where no such malignant feelings are displayed, he may be annoyed by infirmities of temper, such as call for the exercise of unwearied patience. Still, if his own mind is thoroughly subdued, if he is truly humble — he may be able to preserve his peace of mind in the midst of external discord, and feel how sweet a thing it is to be meek and quiet within.

The storm that rages without, the falling rain, and roaring thunder, and tempestuous wind — only serve to make the humble cottager feel how sweet and comfortable is home. Just so, a meek and quiet spirit feels its own happiness the more, when it witnesses the fearful strife of ungoverned and unhallowed passion. The reason why we are so seldom able to maintain this meek and quiet spirit in such circumstances, is that our minds are not thoroughly subdued — there is still *the accursed root of pride in our hearts*, which embitters our feelings and supplies fuel for the fire of strife and contention.

If we were thoroughly meek, we would also be perfectly quiet. But we often speak unadvisedly, and one unguarded word leads to altercation, and altercation ends in strife. We reprove the temper of others, and often in such a way, as to ruffle our own! Oh! that we could remember the words of the apostle, "Let nothing be done through strife or vain-glory — but in lowliness of mind, let each esteem others better than themselves;" and the example of our blessed Lord, who "endured the contradiction of sinners against himself" — lest we should weary and faint in our minds!

The believer is called to exercise a meek and quiet spirit towards others, in reference to the *personal injuries* which they may have committed against himself. *Injury* provokes *resentment* — and resentment prompts *revenge*. The first impulse of every unsubdued

mind, is to render evil for evil; and few minds are so thoroughly sanctified as to be exempted altogether from the temptation to *retaliate*. But the hour of trial is the Christian's time for duty — he must then feel and act as a new creature — as a child of God. If *pride* swells within him, it must be crushed. If *resentment* arises, it must be so checked as that he "shall be angry and yet sin not." If *revenge* prompts retaliation either by tongue or hand, it must be steadily restrained. His spirit is then tested whether it be meek and quiet or not.

Let him in such an hour remember his calm and kind Master, who, "when he was reviled, reviled not again — when he suffered he threatened not — but committed himself unto Him who judges righteously." And let him, with reverence towards God, and with pity towards his offending brother, remember that solemn declaration, "Vengeance is Mine — I will repay! says the Lord."

Many of our heaviest afflictions come to us through the *channel of human agency*. In such cases, as has been already observed, we are too prone to overlook the appointment of God — and to resent the injury that is done to us. And especially when we are insulted and opposed on account of our religion, we are too prone to cherish indignation under the *cloak of Christian zeal*. We think the cause of God and the good of our enemies themselves require that we should not tamely submit to injury, or fail to lift a bold and indignant testimony against error and sin. And it is unquestionably our duty to avouch the Lord as our God in the face of all opposition, and to "be zealous" in advancing his cause. But *the zeal which the Gospel enjoins is such as proceeds from love, and is united with humility and meekness*.

The zeal which many professing Christians display is too often the zeal of *party* or of *pride* — haughty, intemperate, clamorous. It is the zeal which our Lord rebuked, when he said to his disciples, "You know not what spirit you are of." *The pure flame of Christian love must not be mixed with the wildfire of human passion*, "the wrath of

man works not the righteousness of God." The zeal of a proud professor makes him acrimonious and loud in condemning the infirmities of others; but a meek and quiet spirit will, like David, retire and weep, and pray for them, "Rivers of waters run down my eyes because they keep not your law."

Fervent zeal may well consist with a modest and humble estimate of ourselves, and a charitable and gentle spirit towards our neighbor. None can be more zealous than Christ — and yet none so meek and lowly as he.

Let me now very briefly adduce some *reasons* and *motives* fitted to persuade you to the acquirement and cultivation of this spirit. It is here described as a beautiful and lovely disposition of mind — it is called an *ornament*. Wherever a meek and quiet spirit is consistently exhibited in the character of a Christian — it is universally felt and owned to be most attractive and engaging. Those professors who lack it, or who are as yet greatly deficient in it, are on that account less esteemed — their society is often felt to be disagreeable rather than pleasing — their conversation is not so sweet or refreshing.

But a meek and quiet spirit, maintained under all changes of circumstances, and under every provocation, is felt even by unrenewed men to be the noblest proof of the power of practical religion. It is very precious in the sight of God. He regards it, not indeed as meritorious — but as agreeable to his will, and a copy taken from the pattern of his well-beloved Son. Accordingly, a very large portion of his Word is devoted to the inculcation of those principles by which this character is formed; and a large part of his providential discipline is designed to produce and strengthen it in our souls. "God resists the proud — but gives grace to the humble. To that man will he look, even to him that is humble and of a contrite spirit."

It is thus precious in God's sight, because it is closely connected with, and conducive to, the peace of our own minds, and the order of the Church, and of the world. Personal, domestic, and public peace is

promoted by it; and he who is the God of *peace* and the God of *order*, delights in that whereby general happiness is advanced.

No one can estimate how much his own personal comfort depends on his possessing a meek and quiet spirit. Such a spirit easily endures much which frets and discomposes those who are less thoroughly subdued. An affront which exasperates a proud man — a meek man calmly suffers. An injury which revenge resents — meekness overlooks or forgets. And trials which scarcely ruffle the composure of a quiet and contented mind — are sufficient to toss the wicked as on the waves of a troubled and boisterous sea.

Whenever we find ourselves violently discomposed, fretful, impatient, or wretched — we may rest assured that our misery arises much more from the distempered state of our souls, than from any external cause. We should seek relief, by acquiring that meek and quiet spirit, which will raise us above the influence of external circumstances, or enable us calmly to endure them.

Finally, let it be remembered that this temper of mind is not natural to any of us — it must be acquired and cultivated. Nor is it a plant of easy and speedy growth — it is the gradual product of much discipline and of growing Christian experience. It seldom springs up, so as to reach maturity, until after many a storm has rooted and established it — nor even then, unless it be implanted and watered by the Spirit of God. "The fruit of the Spirit is meekness, gentleness, long-suffering." "Experience works patience." "The work of righteousness is peace: and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance forever." (Isaiah 32.17.)

The Case and Cure of a Wounded Spirit

"The spirit of a man will sustain his infirmity — but *a wounded spirit, who can bear?*" Proverbs 18:14

The Preacher here contrasts *outward* with *inward* trouble. Bodily infirmities, or diseases, or any evil affecting it from without, he declares a man is capable of enduring. Not that he ascribes to it a stoic apathy or indifference, or represents the outward sources of affliction as being either few in number, or insignificant in amount — but he attributes to a vigorous and healthy mind, the capacity of sustaining them, in such a manner as that while it feels their pressure, it shall not be *overwhelmed* by them. Exemption from outward evils is forbidden by the fallen state of mankind; insensibility to them is forbidden by the feelings of mankind. But such is the dignity of the human spirit, and such its superiority over the fleshly nature with which it is here united, that, being itself sound and healthy, it may enjoy inward peace, even when surrounded with outward calamity, and rise superior alike to the sense of suffering and the fear of danger.

Subject as it is to all manner of influences from without, it seems hardly possible to assign limits to its power of endurance, if it is upheld by its natural and necessary support — that of true religion. Being capable of religion, its capacity of endurance must be measured by the strength of its supporting principles; by the firmness and durability of those foundations on which it rests. And what infirmity is there which may not be sustained, or what outward calamity that may not be endured — by a mind which, imbued with pious principle — reposes itself on the wisdom, and faithfulness, and love of God; which, believing that all events are under His control, resigns itself to his disposal, and acknowledges His hand alike in every blessing and in every trial; and which, assured of the faithfulness of His promise, is thoroughly persuaded that, however dark or perplexing the course of His providence may be — every successive evolution of the present complicated system is tending to a result worthy of the wisdom and benevolence of God, and that all

things are working together for good to those who love him. Thus supported, the spirit of a man will sustain his infirmities.

In the history of the Church there are many signal examples of the patience and fortitude with which believers have triumphed over every kind and degree of outward sufferings. What trials more numerous or severe than those of Job, when, in one day, four successive messengers announced to him the destruction of his vast possessions, the ruin of his fortune, and the death of his sons — yet, "At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship and said: Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised." (Job 1:20-21.)

And soon after, when God for his further trial, was pleased to smite him with sore bodily disease, and when his wife tempted him to cherish unbelieving thoughts, he said, "What! shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" (Job 2:10.)

In like manner, the power of the human spirit, when adequately supported by religion, to sustain outward sufferings, is signally displayed in the history of those worthies of whom, both men and women, it is said that they "suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented — of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground!" (Hebrews 11:36,37.) Yet, so far from being overwhelmed by those sufferings, as heavy and grievous as they were, the apostle speaks of one of their number as "choosing rather to suffer afflictions with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season," (Hebrews 11:25.) Nay, of believers in general, he says, that they "glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation works patience, and patience experience, and experience hope." And elsewhere adds for himself, "most gladly, therefore, will I

glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me! I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake — for when I am weak, then am I strong." (Romans 5:3; Romans 8:35; 2 Corinthians 12:9.)

In estimating the capacity of the human spirit to bear up under the pressure of outward calamity, it is right to take religion as an element in the calculation — because the human mind is capable of entertaining religion, on the one hand, and because, when entertained, religion is its firmest and surest support on the other. Well may the spirit of a man sustain his infirmities, when his spirit is itself sustained by the truth and faithfulness of God. Resting on this sure foundation, his patience and fortitude may partake of the same firmness which belongs to the grounds of his confidence. In the absence of religion, the mind is deprived of its best support — it rests not on a rock — but clings to a reed. It is glad to have recourse to such means of consolation as the world affords, and seeks rather to forget, than to conquer its sorrows.

Yet such is the kind provision of nature, that even in the absence of religion, many outward calamities may be sustained without any serious inroad on human happiness. There are natural remedies for sorrow, and laws corrective of extreme suffering. For just as a *wound* is staunched by its own blood, or a *bruise* skinned over by the curative processes of nature herself — so many a sufferer is indebted to time, to habit, to society, or some similar influence, for the mitigation of sorrow, even where he neglects the religion which alone can convert sorrow into joy.

If one outward spring of happiness is dried up — he has recourse to another. And wandering from cistern to cistern, broken and empty as they are — he pleases himself with the thought that he may yet be happy. A fond delusion but one, nevertheless, which shows the buoyancy of the human spirit, and which teaches us how high the mind may rise above calamity, if embracing all the supports of which it is capable.

"But," adds the prophet, "a wounded spirit who can bear?" So long as the *mind itself* is untouched, so long as it maintains its soundness and elasticity — so long may it bear up against outward calamity, and rise above the storm. But let the spirit itself be wounded, and thenceforward, not only is it an easy victim to every, even the slightest form of outward evil — but the greatest abundance of outward good is thrown away upon it — it droops and pines unseen, amidst the brightest sunshine of prosperity. For within itself are springs of bitterness, which render every outward comfort insipid or loathsome.

Let us consider the *nature, symptoms, and causes* of this distemper of the spirit, with the view of ascertaining how far it may admit of cure, and by what means that *cure* may be effected.

As to the **NATURE** of this distemper, we must carefully mark the difference between it and certain other states of mind which, although they may have some symptoms apparently in common with it, are nevertheless essentially of a different character. By a *wounded spirit* — we do not understand a mind deranged in its faculties, through insanity, or so deficient in intellectual energy, as to assume the gentler form of idiocy. Where the mind is either radically defective, or altogether disordered — it exhibits, indeed, a melancholy spectacle, for what can be more melancholy than the deprivation of reason?

But, in such cases, there is often *little conscious suffering* — the power of continuous thinking is gone — the mind is seldom sensible of its own condition — but is rather the subject of fitful imaginations and dreams — sometimes sad, no doubt — but as often pleasing, grand, or exciting. And it is not until returning reason throws light on the confusion within, that the sufferer is conscious of his real situation.

But when the spirit is wounded without being deranged, when reason retains her sway, and broods over the inward miseries of a

heart stricken and bleeding — then is the question of the Preacher applicable, "A wounded spirit, who can bear?"

And as this distemper is to be distinguished from idiocy or insanity — so must we, in justice to religion, guard against confounding it with *that broken and contrite spirit which Scripture recommends* as being in itself acceptable to God, and in its effect beneficial to ourselves. A truly broken and contrite heart is consistent with inward peace and comfort. It necessarily implies, indeed, some measure of grief, such grief as the remembrance of sin may and ought to inspire; and that grief, if unalleviated by the consolations and hopes of the Gospel, might settle down into a fixed melancholy, and become a fearful and intolerable burden.

But this is the sorrow of the world which works death; such sorrow as natural convictions may awaken — while natural reason cannot allay it. But the godly sorrow of the Christian, when, with a broken spirit he contemplates his transgressions, is so chastened and mitigated by an apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, that the true penitent is comforted even in his contrition, and feels that this is a spirit which it best befits him to cherish — a spirit which is the most conducive to his peace. So far from crying out, that he cannot bear it, or being anxious to cast it off as a heavy or intolerable load upon his mind — the believer prays that he may have more and more of this holy, and humble, and contrite spirit. It is his great anxiety to nourish it; in this spirit he desires to live; in this spirit he delights to pray; in this spirit he would approach the table of the Lord; in this spirit he hopes to die and to enter Heaven. And the more he succeeds in maintaining it, the more does he feel the unspeakable consolation and supports of the Gospel.

But there is a state of mind, and that of by no means rare occurrence, which corresponds to the description of the Preacher. In this state, the mind is conscious of a total dissatisfaction with itself, and everything with which it has yet become acquainted — a loathing of the world, while as yet no better portion is known or enjoyed by it —

a bitter feeling that it is not, and in its present state cannot, be happy. Nor is this state of mind peculiar to those who are involved in the hardships of poverty, or who have suffered an extraordinary degree of temporal distress. On the contrary, some of its most affecting exhibitions are to be witnessed among those who have enjoyed a large measure of outward prosperity — who are loaded with wealth and honor, and replenished not only with every *necessity* — but with every *comfort* and luxury of life. In the midst of all their outward prosperity, their spirits sink, their happiness is destroyed. And even when surrounded with the pomp and luxury of rank or fortune, an aching heart destroys their peace, and tempts them to loathe the very distinctions which excite the admiration or the envy of the world.

Oh! how often in a day of jubilee, has such a heart sickened at the vanity of the world; and who knows how many hearts are inwardly bleeding in the midst of our gayest assemblies!

"Who," says **Voltaire**, "can, without horror, consider the whole world as the empire of destruction? It abounds with wonders — it also abounds with victims. It is a vast field of carnage and contagion. Every species is without pity pursued and torn to pieces through the earth, and air, and water. In man, there is more wretchedness than in all the other animals put together. He loves life — yet he knows that he must die. If he enjoys a transient good — he suffers various evils, and is at last devoured by worms! This knowledge is his fatal prerogative; other animals have it not. He spends the transient moments of his existence in diffusing the miseries which he suffers — and in repenting of all that he does. The bulk of mankind are nothing more than a crowd of wretches equally criminal and unfortunate. The globe contains rather carcasses, than men. I tremble at the review of this frightful picture, and I wish I had never been born!"

The effects of this distemper are various, and often the most apparently opposite. In all cases, it is destructive of every rational and substantial comfort. It *embitters the heart* — which is at once

the seat and spring of true happiness. It tinges the eye with gloom — so that every outward object is discolored or distorted. It produces indifference, or some harsher feeling towards the living creatures around us — and by drying up the social affections, takes away one of the sweetest sources of comfort. It naturally impairs our health, according to the beautiful language of Solomon, "a merry heart does good like medicine — but a broken spirit tries the bones." (Proverbs 17.22.)

But in seeking relief from it, very different and even opposite courses are pursued. Sometimes, under its pressure, the mind recoils from all fellowship with the world, shrinks from society, and finds a melancholy satisfaction in seclusion and solitude. There brooding over its own miseries, it becomes ascetic or misanthropic — little interested in the happiness of others since it has lost its own — and perhaps deriving a morbid pleasure from every new proof of the vanity of the world or the turpitude of mankind. In other cases, the wretched sufferer is afraid of solitude — cannot bear the company of his own thoughts — and rushes into society, there to forget, amidst the gaieties of fashion; or, should these fail, amidst the deeper excitements of profligacy, the secret horrors by which it is haunted — allowing no time for calm reflection — but intent only on forgetting a misery which it can neither overcome nor endure.

I am convinced that it is the same spirit which often leads to those opposite extremes of *social mirth*, and *secluded melancholy*. If we could look through the *disguises* which it assumes, we might discover the same bitterness of heart in many a scene of gaiety or profligacy, which in other temperaments drives the sufferer to pine unseen in a cottage or a cloister.

Even in our own times, and in ordinary life, many seek relief from the bitterness of disappointment by the use of wine, of opium, or of alcohol — an insidious and dangerous habit, begun perhaps without the intention of being intemperate, and advancing by imperceptible degrees, so that the unhappy victim is scarcely conscious of its

progress, until it becomes his *master* and *tyrant*, and he its helpless and abject slave!

If we inquire into the **CAUSES** of this distemper, we shall find that, while any one of the numerous calamities of life may become the immediate occasion of producing it — yet, none of them have this effect, until, as the result of its general experience, *the mind is led to entertain the fearful conviction that its whole scheme of happiness is false and deceitful*, and that it neither is, nor can be happy in its present course. So long as it can evade this conclusion, and flatter itself with the hope of happiness — it may bear up against the calamities of life, and suffer much without being overwhelmed. But when the fearful truth, (for it is a truth,) that no created thing can render it happy — and that in its present course dissatisfaction and misery must be its constant attendants — when this truth is discerned, and considered in the light of its own experience, the mind is wounded by the discovery, and loses at once its happiness and its hope. It sinks under calamities which otherwise might have been endured, and becomes either despondently anxious, or recklessly careless, about everything which most nearly concerns it.

There are two considerations, both included in this general statement, which deserve to be specified, as the principal causes which operate in the production of a wounded spirit:

the first relating to happiness in the *present world*,
the second to our *prospects beyond the grave*.

1. A consideration which has a strong tendency to produce the distempered spirit which has been described, is, *the vanity and emptiness of the world*; the felt impossibility of deriving from it that satisfaction which we had fondly expected; and the evidence which every day's experience multiplies . . .

of the instability of our dearest treasures,
of the uncertainty of our sweetest enjoyments,

and the disappointment of our fondest hopes.

Who that has passed from youth to manhood, and contrasts his early expectations with his actual experience — has altogether escaped the withering feeling of disappointment? As we advance in life, are we not every day more thoroughly schooled in this universal lesson of human experience, that the world is a vain show; and that its best enjoyments are either beyond our reach, or difficult of attainment; and when attained, they are transient, precarious, and unsatisfying. And our prospects, if confined to the things which are seen and temporal, are not brighter than our past experience.

Which of our present comforts can we count on retaining?

Our *wealth* may be taken away.

Our *friends* may grow cool and desert us; at all events, they must die.

Our *good name* is at the mercy of a thousand evil tongues.

Our *health* may fail and disable us for every enjoyment.

And soon, very soon, we must leave all earthly things, and resign them to others.

Nay, were every temporal comfort continued with us to the close of life, can we expect to derive from them more substantial happiness than we have yet enjoyed in them — and has that been such as to satisfy the cravings, or fill the capacities of our souls?

The mind that thus calmly contemplates its *past experience* and *future prospects*, is learning a great lesson, a lesson which God has designed the *vanity of the world* to teach us — even that souls formed in His image cannot find their happiness in any earthly object — that successful as they may be in the world, they must look *beyond it* for the satisfaction of desires too great to be limited by its

range; and that so long as they look to the world alone or chiefly, they will find it to be but "vanity and vexation of spirit."

Now, a mind that has made this discovery, and sensibly feels its truth, without having yet discerned or embraced the better portion that is provided for it, is a *wounded spirit*. It is not only unhappy — but feels that it must be so in its present course. It loathes the vain world, and yet has no higher good in view, and it will either become reckless of all consequences, or sink into despondency or despair. Many such spirits there are among us, pining unseen under the growing conviction of the world's vanity. What, I ask, can the world do for them? The world can do nothing, for it is the very vanity of the world which has caused their distemper. They have tried its *cisterns* and have found them empty and broken. They have gone *the round of its vanities*, and have found nothing but vexation of spirit.

And that human philosophy which would recommend either *Stoic apathy* or *Epicurean indulgence* as a means of relief, is felt to be a *vain parade of words* to a spirit which knows its own bitterness, and which is conscious that, by the constitution of its nature, it can neither be indifferent to happiness on the one hand — nor satisfied with the world's happiness on the other.

And as to the worldly prudence, which would, in such circumstances, laugh them out of their convictions, or recommend recreation, and mirthful society, and amusement, to hearts bleeding and diseased — they look on their sage instructor as one who is not yet so far advanced as themselves in the actual experience of the world — but as treading the same path which they trod, and sure to reach the same conclusion; and feel that it must be either in ignorance or in mockery that he speaks of worldly amusements or gaiety as a cure.

They may yield, however, to the advice — but with an inward consciousness that it must be vain, or with a feeling that it is better to forget what they cannot hope to remedy. They wander from scene to

scene with the arrow still sticking fast in their bosom — with the wound still bleeding in their hearts.

If, in such a case, we could expect a cure, it is evident that a new class of objects must be presented to the mind; and this is in part admitted by those who recommend change of scene, or of occupation, or of amusement. But their error consists in not seeing that to a mind which has already discovered the vanity of the world, not only a new but a totally different and far higher class of objects must be presented — that in such a case, the world has been tried and exhausted; and that the eye must be directed beyond the world and above it for true and lasting consolation.

Such objects there are within the compass of human knowledge — the great, sure, and everlasting objects of the Christian faith and hope; and as these are necessary to be known by all, so they are peculiarly suitable to the wounded spirit. Let the *eye* which sees nothing but gloom and misery in the world, be lifted above it. Let the *mind* which is perplexed by the uncertain and unsatisfying nature of "all things seen and temporal," be directed to the stability and glory of "things unseen and eternal." Let the *heart* which feels that nothing on earth can fill its capacities of enjoyment, be taught that God himself is a sure and satisfying portion to them that seek him.

In a word, let them see that, instead of seeking their happiness in the *creature*, they may seek and find it in God himself. And, immediately on such perception, the mystery of their condition will become clear. The heart, which drooped, will revive. Hope will again animate the bosom which the world had given as a prey to despair. Everything around and before them will appear in a new light — and they will feel as if a dark cloud had suddenly been broken and dispersed — a heavy burden removed — a galling yoke struck from their spirits, "all old things have passed away, and all things become new."

Instead of wondering as they once did, at the unsatisfying nature of earthly good; instead of being disposed, as formerly, to repine at that

arrangement of Providence which prevents perfect happiness in the enjoyment of the *creature* — the emancipated spirit will perceive that this is itself one of the wisest ordinations of the divine mind, and one of the highest tokens of his benevolence, inasmuch as by thus depriving the creature of all power of being happy without God — he has laid him under a sort of moral necessity, or, at least, held out to him the highest inducement to seek to Himself — that if He dried up the *streams*, or mingled bitterness with its waters — it was that they might be led to repair to the fountain.

He who has discovered that God is the only portion of his spirit, may well rest assured that this portion will never fail him, nor come short of his expectations and desires. For unlike the world, God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is infinite, and adequate, therefore, to fill the largest capacities of the soul. He is perfect, without one defect or blemish. He is all-sufficient, and, being ever present, may be continually enjoyed. Yes, death itself, so far from depriving us of this portion, will only place us in the full enjoyment of it, and eternity will only unfold more of its excellency and worth. "Nevertheless I am continually with You? You hold my right hand. You guide me with Your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honor. Whom have I in Heaven but You? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than You. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever!" Psalm 73:23-26

As by presenting God as the only sure and satisfying portion of our souls, the Christian religion directs us to an infinite and inexhaustible source of satisfaction. By revealing the doctrine of immortality, and teaching us the connection which exists between our present course on earth and our everlasting destiny hereafter — it removes and rebukes those dismal and degrading views which we are apt to entertain respecting our present life, so long as our prospects are limited within its narrow range.

Considering ourselves as a class of creatures, like others, mortal, and comparing our actual enjoyments on earth with those of the inferior

animals — the gloomy thought which will occur to a mind convinced of the world's vanity, is neither unnatural; nor, if immortality is forgotten, altogether untrue. Even that the power of reflection and forethought, by which we are distinguished from them, have materially increased our sufferings, without enabling us to discover a cure for them. We are thereby qualified to discover the vanity of the world, without being able to secure a higher good; and that if the present life is to terminate our existence, it had been better for us to have had the same thoughtless and undisturbed enjoyment of it, which is given to the birds of the air or the beasts of the field.

This is intimated to us by the apostle, when, referring to his labors and sufferings in the cause of religion, he points to the prospect of eternal life as the motive and justification of his course; and asks, "What advantage it me, if the dead rise not — let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die!" (1 Corinthians 15.32.)

But let the mind which has long brooded over the dismal prospect of death, and, while under the influence of the melancholy feelings which the shortness and uncertainty of human life are fitted to inspire, has become indifferent to the world, or disgusted with it — let such a mind be once vividly impressed with the idea of its own immortality; let it be thoroughly convinced that the being which is begun on earth will stretch onward and onward through the immeasurable ages of eternity; let it contemplate the sublime prospect of everlasting life beyond the grave, and, assured of that great certainty — let it be taught to look upon its earthly course as the preparation for a career which shall never end — and who can fail to see that here is . . .

an *object* fitted at once to rebuke and to destroy its despondency,
a *prize* worthy to excite again its torpid desires,
a *motive* to animate its resolution,
a *truth* which at once explains the mysteries of its present being,
and throws a glowing light on its future prospects!

I say, let the saddest spirit that ever mourned over the world's vanity, be once thoroughly impressed with the belief of eternal life — and from that instant, the vanity of life will no more be thought of; for life will then assume a new aspect, and appear invested with a solemn importance, as the preparatory discipline of an immortal spirit — a state of education for eternity — a probation on which results far too momentous to be adequately conceived of, depend. And while it will no longer look to the world as the source of its happiness, or to the present life as the season of its reward — it will be nerved with new vigor to prosecute its business, and to discharge its duties. And, looking on it in the light of religion, the gloom which formerly overcast it will disappear.

Disconsolate spirit! You that like the dove can find no resting-place on earth — here is a refuge for you; a sure, and sweet, and abiding refuge: choose God for your portion, and Heaven for your home. Here are new objects, worthy of your highest regard, adequate to fill your largest desires, and fitted alike by their greatness and their stability, to secure your everlasting happiness.

That you have seen the vanity of the world, is well — God has thus been preparing you for discovering the value of true religion. But beware of resting at this point, *as if despondency were a proof of piety*; or as if the discovery of the world's vanity were the only article of religion. Remember that many a man is bitterly dissatisfied with his present state, and often weary with the world — who has yet no portion in God. It is not enough that his affections be withdrawn from things "seen and temporal" — unless they are transferred to things "unseen and eternal." Seek not to remain in a neutral state, or to cherish unconcern and indifference. So long as your heart beats within you, it will yearn after some object on which its desires and affections may be fixed. And if the world cannot allure them, or is unworthy of them — then no happiness can be enjoyed until they rise above the world to God.

By the discipline of his providence, by every successive disappointment or bereavement with which he has visited you, God has been saying, "Seek my face!" Let every wounded spirit reply, "Your face, O Lord, will I seek." There are many that say: *Who shall show us any good?* But my prayer will be, "Lord, lift up the light of your countenance upon me." "God is the portion of my soul, therefore will I trust in him." "My heart and my flesh faint and fail — but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever." "Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vines; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields, and the cattle barns are empty — yet I will rejoice in the LORD! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation!"

I am well aware, however, that to a wounded spirit, religion itself appears gloomy and repulsive; and that there are certain feelings in every breast, which serve even to increase the despondency of a mind in this situation, when it contemplates its relation to God. *These feelings arise from a consciousness of guilt and corruption* — and this of itself, may in some cases become so intense as to produce the very state of mind for which we propose religion as a cure. The spirit may be so wounded by it, and so harassed by the fear which it awakens, as to become the prey of what has been, not very properly, called, *religious despondency*.

2. This is the second of the two causes to which I proposed to direct your attention — a cause which operates sometimes without the former, so as to render a man really unhappy even while he is as yet not deeply convinced of the vanity of the world; and which at other times, so concurs with a conviction of the unsatisfactory nature of earthly good, as to leave the mind without any resource either temporal or spiritual.

The conscience is troubled by a sense of guilt, and by the terror of an angry God. This may come on, in the midst of the greatest outward prosperity, and after a long period of insensibility and

unconcern. It is the most fearful of all visitations, and makes a man a terror to himself. Even the believer, in those seasons of spiritual darkness when he cannot realize the glorious truths and hopes of the Gospel, is subject to it. "You write bitter things against me" said Job, "and make me to possess the iniquities of my youth." "The arrows of the Almighty are within me, the poison whereof drinks up my spirit! The terrors of God do set themselves in array against me. Oh! that I might have my request, and that God would grant me the thing that I long for. Even that it would please God to destroy me, that he would let loose his hand and cut me off!" "Your arrows stick fast in me," said David, "and your hand presses me sorely. There is no soundness in my flesh, because of your anger, neither is there any rest in my bones, because of my sin. For my iniquities are gone over my head; they are too heavy for me! I am troubled; I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long; I am feeble and sore broken; I have roared by reason of the disquietness of my heart."

Such is *the agony of a troubled conscience when under convictions of sin*. Now we do not deny the truth and reasonableness of such convictions. We would not say one word to dissipate them. On the contrary, we believe that our deepest convictions of guilt fall far short of the actual truth, and that all the fears which conscience awakens are not commensurate with the real danger of our situation. The truth is, that we are sinners, and, as such, exposed to very heavy divine judgments; and it is well that we know the fact and feel it too.

It is true, also, that in such circumstances, a wounded spirit can derive no consolation from the fact of God's existence, or the prospect of an eternal world — so long as it is ignorant of the means of forgiveness, or unwilling to embrace them. No language can express the dissatisfaction and misery of a soul when both causes concur to trouble it, and when it can neither look to the *world* with pleasure, nor to *God* with confidence.

And what can the *world* do for one in such a case? What direction, encouragement, or comfort, can *human philosophy* bestow?

Conscious of his own misery, he cannot trifle with his convictions. Conscience is awake, and its still small voice cannot be silenced by those who would make a mock of sin, or teach him to regard it as a imaginary or trivial evil.

Nor is it every form of religion that can meet the needs, or satisfy the cravings of such a spirit. The legal or self-righteous system would only aggravate its misery. But there is a cure — and that is to be found, like every other consolation, in the Gospel of Christ. The blood of Jesus can pacify the conscience, when most disturbed. Let the saddest spirit that ever mourned over its guilt and pollution, be brought clearly to see the freeness and the riches of divine grace. Let it but understand the true character of God, as "God in Christ, reconciling a guilty world to himself, and not imputing unto men their trespasses," as "The Lord God merciful and gracious, abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, pardoning iniquity, and transgression, and sin." Let it but understand the import of that declaration, "God so loved the world as to give his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him might not perish — but might have everlasting life." Let it conceive aright of the sufficiency of the Savior's work, and the perfect freeness with which every sinner is invited to go to him without money and without price. Let it thus know and believe the import of the Gospel message — and instead of being overwhelmed by its convictions, it will be led by means of them to a sure and unfailing ground of consolation.

By this *apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ*, "the wounded spirit" is converted into "a broken and contrite one." It loses all the bitterness without losing any of the humiliation which a sense of guilt inspires. The sorrow of the world which works death — becomes a godly sorrow, working repentance, not to be repented of.

Disconsolate spirit! You who mourn in secret over the bitterness of a troubled conscience — look to the Savior, and be at peace. He now speaks to you, and says, that for such as you are, he came into the world: "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, for he has anointed

me to preach good tidings to the meek; to comfort all that mourn; to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness."

Look to the Savior — and through him look up to God as a forgiving Father! "Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord his God! For the Lord loosens the prisoners — the Lord opens the eyes of the blind — the Lord raises them that are bowed down — he heals the broken in heart and binds up their wounds." And of you may it be said, as in times past of many a wounded spirit, "This poor man cried — the Lord heard, and saved him out of all his troubles!"

Preparation for Death

"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. For in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom." Ecclesiastes 9:10

The Preacher, taking a large view of human life, and considering man as a being destined at no very distant period, to change his present state for another, exhorts his readers, in these words, to the diligent doing of whatever remains to be done before their change arrives. He enforces his admonition by two considerations or motives:

first, that they are going to the grave;
secondly, that once in the grave, all their opportunities will cease.

I propose to direct your thoughts to these two considerations separately, and then to explain and apply the exhortation which the Preacher has founded on them — in the hope, that such as are still frittering away their time and their talents on the vanities of the

world, unmindful of the coming eternity — may, under the divine blessing, be induced to think seriously of their eternal prospects. And that such of us as have already turned our faces towards Zion, may be animated and stirred up to greater diligence, in making our calling and election sure.

1. Let me remind each of you, and let every one apply it to himself, as if his own name were now audibly pronounced: "**You are going to the grave!**" Which of us all can deny or even doubt the certainty of this? You may sometimes hear in Church certain doctrines which you are at a loss to understand, or the grounds of whose certainty you cannot clearly perceive. But here there is no room for *doubt*, for *dispute*, or for *denial*, "You are going to the grave!"

With unerring certainty, such as he can feel in regard to no other event, the preacher can warn every man of this: "*You are going to the grave!*" And looking abroad over the largest assembly of human beings, he can tell, without the possibility of being mistaken, that, within a given number of years — every one of them shall be in the dust; and the place which now knows them, shall know them no more forever.

As many human beings as are at any time on the earth's surface, are conveyed to its bosom in the course of little more than thirty years. And if one life be prolonged to three score years and ten — two or three others for every such life come to a premature termination. But all, of whatever age or strength, are going in the same direction, and will meet at last!

If we look on the whole race as moving onwards to the tomb, what a melancholy procession is human life, with all its gaiety and grandeur — a procession to the chambers of death!

Were we habitually mindful of this; did we look on life, with a calm and steady eye, as a progress to the tomb; did we think of every man that passes by, whether in the gaudy attire of fashion, or in the pride

of triumphant ambition, or in the mirthful pursuit of pleasure, or even in the rags of poverty, and the agony of want, "You are going to the grave!" — how would this reflection serve to diminish in our eye the distinctions of the world, to rebuke its idle fashions, and to direct our reflections to what alone is valuable — that which alone will endure.

And, above all, did the thought occur to us as frequently as it ought, and were it reflected on as its certainty and importance deserve — did I often say to myself, "*I am going to the grave*" — Oh! what gravity of thought, what composure of manner, what deep seriousness of spirit would such a thought produce! With how much less power would either the *wealth*, or the *honors*, or the *pleasures* of the world seduce me from what alone is worthy of a dying man's regard — that which alone can fit him for the grave.

"Am I going to the grave?" — might one say. Then, why be so anxious, so busy, so engrossed with the world? Could I amass riches — can I keep them? Could I procure *fame* — what would it avail me there, where great and small meet together, in one common oblivion? No, I am going to the grave. I am every day drawing nearer to that scene where all earthly distinctions are forgotten — and I will pursue my journey heedless of the seductions of the world, and intent only on being prepared, in due time, to lay down without alarm and without regret, a life which I cannot long retain! And with a serious spirit, befitting the solemn termination of my journey, I shall set myself diligently to the work for which life was bestowed. It may be that in my case life will be protracted; but, along the whole line of my earthly pilgrimage, I must expect trials and difficulties sufficient to warrant a holy seriousness of spirit. Yet at length my life must terminate, no matter whether sooner or later, whether suddenly or by slow advances — terminate it must, in death. And it befits me, as a thinking being, not destitute of forethought, so to feel, and so to act, at all seasons, as one to whom God himself has said, "You are going to the grave!"

Such might be the influence of this simple but solemn lesson, were it habitually remembered in the course of life.

But the impression would be greatly increased by reflecting with the same seriousness on the second consideration which is here presented, namely, "For in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom."

2. That once in the grave, all our opportunities will cease.

This statement is not to be understood as intimating either that the soul shall pass into a state of unconsciousness and oblivion, or that, being conscious, it shall exist in a state of passiveness or inactivity — for this were contrary as well to the argument here urged by the Preacher, as to the uniform and strong testimony of Scripture in many other places, where the state of the soul after death is expressly described.

We there read of two conscious states of existence, in one or other of which every human soul will hereafter be found:

1. A state of active improvement and exalted happiness in Heaven.
2. A state of rapid degeneracy and conscious wretchedness in Hell.

In both these states, all the faculties of the mind, all the affections of the heart, all the powers of human nature will be in a state of active exercise. Nor will the acquisition here made of knowledge, whether good or evil, be forgotten. Memory will still do its busy work — awakening gratitude in one, and remorse in another class of characters forever. And there, as here, will their faculties be employed in devising schemes of good or of evil, and active exertion will follow to carry these schemes into effect.

That the inhabitants of Heaven will be actively engaged in God's service, is one of the most delightful revelations of Scripture! They will serve him day and night in his temple. They will advance in the

attainment of knowledge, as their faculties expand, and their opportunities of observation are multiplied. Instead of being doomed to endless sloth and inactivity, they will find their chief happiness there, as here, in the diligent discharge of duty, as God's ministering servants. This doctrine, as it corresponds with the view which is given of the present occupations of the angels as ministering spirits, sent forth to execute God's purposes, and to minister to them who shall be heirs of salvation — so is it in accordance with all that we know of the constitution of the human mind; which has been so framed as to be incapable of any real or lasting happiness apart from the exercise of its own faculties on objects, or in works suitable to its nature and capacity.

When we are told, therefore, that in the grave there is neither work, nor device, nor wisdom, nor knowledge — we are not to understand that the active powers of the soul will be suspended by death, far less that death is destructive of human consciousness and thought; for this idea is in direct opposition to numerous express testimonies of Sacred Scripture in other places. More especially, the *supposed annihilation* of human consciousness or activity, so far from being an argument for greater diligence now, would, on the contrary, run counter to the very design for which the Preacher here urges it, by creating in our minds an utter recklessness as to the course of our life, seeing that in its consummation no difference would be made between the active and the slothful, the righteous and the wicked.

If at the hour of death, all were alike consigned to unconscious and inactive repose; if all knowledge and all wisdom were lost, then, on that supposition — then how could the approach of death be urged, as here it is urged, as a reason for increasing diligence in the accomplishment of our several works on earth. Might not rather the suggestion be rationally entertained by us all, which occurred even to the mind of an apostle in contemplating this supposed result, "What advantage it me," (that I have thought and labored, and suffered in the service of Christ,) "If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!" 1 Corinthians 15:32

This *epicurean maxim of life* would unquestionably be the most rational, were it so, that thought, and consciousness, and activity, terminate with our present existence. Instead of being an argument for "doing now what our hands find to do with our might" — such a supposition would deprive us of every reason and of every motive for exertion, except in so far as such exertion might conduce to our temporal comfort and pleasure.

The real meaning of the last clause will be understood if we consider it in connection with the first: it is that work which our *hands* find to do *on earth*, in reference to which the Preacher declares that there is "no work, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, nor device in the grave." We are not to take the latter clause absolutely and by itself — but we are to view it in connection with the subject of the Preacher's exhortation, by which it is at once limited and explained. Speaking of the work which our *hands* find to do, the Preacher declares that if it is not accomplished now — then it cannot be accomplished hereafter; that in reference to that work, there is no knowledge, nor wisdom, nor device, no opportunity, no means, no possibility of attending to it hereafter, if it is neglected now.

This is the season appointed for a certain work; if that season is lost, there remains no opportunity of fulfilling our task. We shall continue to exist, to think, to feel, and to act — but that work which our *hands* find to do *now*, cannot be done hereafter — it must be done now or never. This is the plain import of the motive which is here urged: not that any of us shall ever be consigned to a state of unconsciousness — but that the work which is appointed to us now cannot be accomplished after death; it is the proper work of time, whose unchangeable results will be manifested in eternity.

Now if we take *the most ordinary view of death, as that which separates us from every earthly privilege or pursuit* — we shall be at no loss to discover the reasons on which the Preacher founds the exhortation in the text. For conceive of death simply as the separation of our souls from the present state of being; as that which

dissevers all our connections with the world; as that which withdraws us at once, and forever, from the family circle — from the friends whom we love — from the society in which we mingle — from everything that is known or done under the sun.

Conceive of death in this the simplest and plainest view that can be taken of it, and may we not well say with the Preacher, that in reference to everything which here engages the interest, or concerns the welfare of man, "There is no work, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, nor device in the grave?"

The die is cast — the world is no more — its business, its pleasures, its ordinances, its duties, its joys and sorrows, its opportunities, are all ended — they can neither be observed, nor improved, nor experienced by us more.

And as this is in itself a solemn and a mournful thought, so is it one which every instance of death suggests. Look on a human body when life has left it, and what reflection more natural or more certain, than that its work on earth is over; that change as the world may, it can have no more experience of its vicissitudes; that no more will it appear in the place of human concourse, or mingle in the competition of earthly business, or partake in the joys or sorrows of the world; the ties which bind it to the earth are snapped asunder; it is to this world as if it had never been.

Affecting as such a separation from all earthly things must be in any view which we can take of it, it becomes the more solemn, when we consider it in connection with the views which Scripture teaches us to entertain of the present life — as a season of trial and probation for another life to come. For then this separation is not merely a disruption of those ties which bind man to man — but a withdrawal from the means of grace, and the opportunities of salvation. If it is true that, in reference to that work which our hands now find to do, there is neither knowledge, nor wisdom, nor device in the grave — then is it certain that salvation, unless it be gained now,

must be lost forever. The means of grace will not be continued with us after death — we shall by that event be separated from Christian ordinances, withdrawn from the scene of trial, and introduced into a state of strict and unalterable retribution.

As the tree falls, so it shall lie. Our characters, just such as they are at death, will be brought to judgment. Once separated from the earth, we have no longer the capacity either of deriving benefit from the means of grace which the living enjoy, or of bestowing any benefit on others. Our opportunities alike of improvement and of usefulness are past, and whatever in the way either of personal or public duty remains unfulfilled, must remain so forever.

Now it is from this consideration, of our entire separation at death both from the means of grace, and the opportunities of usefulness, that the Preacher draws the motive here urged for the instant and diligent doing of "whatever our hands find to do."

3. Let me solicit your attention to the duty here enjoined in some of its most important details, requesting each of you to apply it to yourselves, and to ask, with the seriousness and sincerity which so well befits us in the prospect of death, "*What have I to do before I die?*"

Is there any one who, on seriously asking himself this question, can truly say, "I have *nothing* to do before I die." Many of us may be acting as if this were the case; allowing one day after another to pass away unimproved for the great ends for which our time is lengthened out; careless how life is spent, or solicitous only to secure as many of its *fleeting pleasures and idle distinctions* as we can. But in the midst of all this carelessness, I know that there is something in every man's bosom which will respond to my statement, when I say, that he has in reality much to do before he can meet death with composure and peace! As much, indeed, as will afford sufficient scope for his utmost diligence, however long his term of life may be.

For, first, have you nothing to do, in the way of securing the everlasting salvation of your souls? This is the grand concern; and ought to be the chief business of every man on earth. If the soul is lost — all is lost. For making the strongest possible supposition, a supposition so strong that no worldling can ever hope to realize it, our Lord asks, "What is a man profited if he gains the whole world — and loses his soul?"

Now you know enough to awaken your serious thoughts on this matter, for you know that your souls are in danger — you know that many will finally perish. You must either be total strangers to your own hearts, or grievously deceiving yourselves as to their real condition — if you have not discovered many proofs of your own sinfulness and danger, such as should awaken you to immediate and anxious concern.

Think for one instant of the condition in which you really stand, as dying creatures, destined to an eternal world, and in danger of being lost forever. And I ask, whether the salvation of your souls is not a matter with which no earthly consideration should be allowed to interfere — a matter of such grave and solemn importance, that until this is settled — all other pursuits, whether of business or of amusement, should be postponed?

For is it not the height of madness for a being possessed of reason to acknowledge that the salvation of his soul is yet at stake, and yet to live day after day, and week after week, without making any serious efforts to secure what his conscience tells him to be so necessary and so valuable? This is the chief thing that our hands find to do on earth.

The Gospel places salvation within our reach; it declares the purpose and the plan of God for that end; it reveals an all-sufficient and most merciful Savior; it invites you to accept salvation at his hands as a free gift — a gift offered to every sinner that will accept of it, without money and without price. That salvation consists chiefly of two parts, which are equally necessary, and inseparable from one another.

The **first** is, pardon, justification, or acceptance with God — the sole ground of which is, the righteousness of Christ. You need pardon — and here pardon is proclaimed. "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin!" "In him we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sin, according to the riches of his grace!" "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thought, and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him, and to our God for he will abundantly pardon!"

But pardon is not the whole of this great salvation. It is a salvation from sin — as well as from suffering; from corruption — not less than from condemnation. It pacifies the conscience — but it also purifies the heart. "Except a man be born again, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." We must "be washed, we must be justified, we must be sanctified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God." This is the comprehensive salvation of the Gospel, and it cannot be divided; it must be wholly embraced — or wholly rejected. It is offered *freely*, and offered to *all*.

And, although salvation is not of works, the Gospel points to certain means which are necessary to be used in order to its being enjoyed; it invites you to draw near to God, and to pray to him; it calls upon you to repent of your past sins, and to break off every evil and every wicked way; it commands you to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved; and to seek the gracious assistance of the Holy Spirit, by whom alone you can be prepared for Heaven.

Here is enough to engage your utmost diligence; for although the *terms* of the Gospel are free, yet its *privileges* can only be enjoyed in the diligent use of the appointed means. They are not showered down on the listless, or slothful, or self-indulgent. On the contrary, the Savior requires his disciples to deny themselves, to take up the cross and follow him. They only will succeed in the Christian course, who lay aside every weight, and the sin that so easily besets them, and run with patience and perseverance the race that is set before them.

If, on inquiring, you find that as yet you have no reason to be satisfied that the salvation of your soul is secured — this is the work which your hands find to do. It is your *interest* as well as your *duty* to do it with your might, to do it in good earnest, to do it instantly, to do it diligently and perseveringly. You must strive to enter in — you must press toward the mark.

Let every one put the question to himself: Have I obtained the salvation of my soul? Were I to be summoned away, am I prepared to stand, just as I am, at the judgment-seat of Christ? Can I say, "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed to him until the great day?" If not, let no time be lost! Set about this great work with all your might! Give to it your most serious attention! Flee from the wrath to come — lay hold on eternal life — fall down on your knees before the mercy-seat. And placing your hope in that Savior who died to redeem sinners, plead the merits of his atonement, and cast yourselves on the mercy of a covenant God. Give no sleep to your eyes, or slumber to your eyelids, until you have solemnly and in God's presence, committed yourselves into his hands.

Secondly, Even the people of God have much to do — and the Preacher's admonition should stir them up to greater diligence in doing it. They have the remains of a corrupt nature, which must be subdued. They have evil tempers, or dispositions, or habits which require to be watched against and corrected. They are defective in knowledge, in faith, in love, in humility, in meekness, in all the graces and virtues which, as Christ's disciples, and as the heirs of a happy immortality, they are bound to exercise and to cultivate.

What Christian will not acknowledge with shame, how much he needs to be reminded of his duty in these respects . . .

how lamentably he has fallen short of his own resolutions in former times,
how frequently he has fallen into a state of backsliding,

how constantly he has lived below his privileges,
how little his actual experience accords with his profession and
his hopes as an expectant of immortality, and
how much he needs to be frequently and earnestly stirred up to
finish the work which is given him to do?

If he regards the state of his *knowledge*, he will find reason to confess that whereas by this time he might have been a teacher of others, he has need to be taught himself what be the first principles of the oracles of God.

If he regards the state of his *affections*, he finds that he is far from being what the apostle exhorts every Christian to become — spiritually-minded, which is life and peace.

If he regards his *conduct*, he sees much that requires amendment and calls for renewed repentance. He will acknowledge that after all that God has done for him, and all the professions and resolutions which he has himself made, he is down to this hour an "unprofitable servant."

Think then, professing Christians, on what your hands find to do. Ask yourselves in your closets, and pray that God may teach you to discover, what *roots of bitterness* are still springing up within you. Search out the plague of your own hearts. Bring forth every guilty passion from its concealment, and deliberately renounce it. Set yourselves vigorously to the work of subduing whatever is unholy or rebellious — and to nourish those graces of character which are most opposed to your natural dispositions.

If you are naturally *proud* — seek to mortify pride, and humble yourselves both before God and man. If you are naturally morose, or selfish — seek to become loving and kind. This is the work which your hands find to do, and the further you advance in it, the riper will you be for the glory that is to follow.

If we would meet death, not only in safety, but with comfort — we must *live in the habitual expectation of it*. This expectation is abundantly reasonable, for the event is certain, and we know not how soon or how suddenly it may overtake us.

We know not *when* it may occur — this year, this week, this night.

We know not *where* or in what *situation* it may find us — at home, on our own pillow, in the midst of our weeping family and friends, or in the highway, or the solitary desert, or in a foreign land.

We know not by what *means* it may be accomplished, whether by the silent undermining of slow disease, or by the violent attack of some malignant malady, or by the hand of our fellow-men, or by the convulsions of the earth, or by the perils of the deep.

We know nothing but the naked truth — we must die. The *certainty of death* is one motive and a strong one — but the uncertainty in which we are left as to the time and situation and means of death, gives it still greater urgency. Our Lord refers to both when he says, "Be ready, for in such an hour as you think not, the Son of Man will come."

If we would meet death with comfort — we must have our treasure in Heaven, and our hearts there also. We must be much conversant with the invisible world, and well assured of eternal life, and habituated to the contemplation of glory. If our treasure is on earth — our heart will be there also. If our hearts cling to the world — no wonder that they revolt from that final separation. Hence the regret and alarm, the tumult of grief and fear, by which many are agitated, when they are first impressed with the conviction that they are dying.

Some even of God's people, who are really safe, as being united to Christ and renewed in the spirit of their minds, have, nevertheless, no comfort — but on the contrary, much distress and uneasiness in the prospect of death. The reason is, that they are so little conversant with Heaven.

This is the grand consideration. There are other circumstances that may serve to *allay* the fear of death — but the hope of Heaven alone can *overcome* it. We must be spiritually-minded, if we would have peace in that trying hour. Our hearts must be very much in Heaven, before we can be reconciled to leave this green earth, and to enter the dark valley. And the means of raising our thoughts and affections heavenward, are frequent meditation, and fervent prayer.

Lastly, Let each of us, while we are attentive to the salvation of our souls and the moral improvement of our characters, remember the apostolic injunction, "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." We have important duties to discharge towards our fellow-men, so long as we continue in the midst of them. The time is fast approaching which will put an end to our opportunities of doing them good. There is no work of this kind in the grave — our season for benefitting our families, and friends, and country, is now or never.

"Set your house in order," said the prophet, "for you shall die and not live!" This may refer, in the first instance, to the *regulation of our worldly affairs* — a duty which ought not to be negligently postponed, so as to leave the mind harassed with secular anxiety at a time when its whole energy should be reserved for spiritual employment. And one, which includes in it, not only the settlement of our domestic concerns at the close of life — but a due regulation of our business during the whole course of it, so as that we may not involve ourselves, by speculation and adventure, in such a labyrinth of engagements and cares as may make us anxious and uneasy in the prospect of death.

But still more does it refer to those moral and *spiritual* duties which we owe to our children and friends. Let us not delay doing any good work which we have it in our present power to accomplish.

Have we children to instruct?

Have we friends to counsel, or comfort, or rebuke?

Have we the means of relieving the needs of our poorer brethren?

Have we an opportunity of promoting the great cause of religion at home or abroad?

Have we heard or read of any scheme which commends itself to our judgment, as likely to promote the welfare of our fellow-men?

Then let us cheerfully put our hand to the work! Let us give our *time*, our *substance*, our active *exertions* to these objects — acting in the spirit, and imitating the example of our Lord himself, who, as a reason for the unwearied diligence with which he prosecuted his labors, said, "I must work the work of Him that sent me while it is day. The night comes in which no man can work."

Thus prepared . . .

united to Christ the Savior by a simple faith,
reconciled to God by his cross,
renewed and animated by his Holy Spirit,
having our treasure in Heaven, and our heart there also
— we may, with humble hope, meet the *king of terrors*, and
enter into the rest which remains for the people of God.

And then, all dangers past, all temptations overcome, all enemies subdued, "we shall forever be with the Lord! Therefore, *comfort* one another with these words."

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