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Sermons

by

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HOW TO ESTIMATE REPENTANCE.

Likewise I say unto you, There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.—Luke xv. 10.

These words, my friends, bring before our minds a very interesting subject of contemplation. They introduce to our observation the Angels of God—the most exalted of created beings; they represent those sublime Intelligences as rejoicing, and rejoicing at a spectacle which is furnished to them by the transactions of this lower world and the interests of our fellowmen. Such a subject may well fix our thoughts and rivet our attention, and may afford to us matter of instructive as well as interesting contemplation. Let us draw near, then, and contemplate this strange and interesting scene, and let us remember meanwhile that the ground on which we tread is holy.

We shall attempt first to explain the true Nature and Character of that event or transaction which is described in the text as ‘the repentance of a sinner;’ and then consider, in the second place, what are the Feelings with which this event is or ought to be viewed.

The event or transaction which is represented as calling forth the joy of the angels of God is described as ‘the Repentance of a sinner.’ Now, before proceeding to show precisely what is the nature and character of this event, we may deduce from the text some general characteristic properties or qualities of the event, which may serve in some measure to guide our inquiries into its precise nature, and may be applied as testament of the accuracy of the results to which our investigations may lead us.

Whatever, then, might be the precise nature of the event which is described in the text as the repentance of a sinner, it must be an event of great and permanent importance. We may be assured that it is no slight or trivial matter, no event the consequences of which are but temporary and transient, which calls forth 'joy in the presence of the angels of God.' We reckon it a mark of weakness and folly in one of our fellow-men, when his feelings of joy are excited by trivial and insignificant circumstances, or by hasty and superficial views of objects and events. And the propriety of such a mode of judging is sanctioned not only by the examination of the nature of the thing, but also by the dictate of almost universal experience. Upon the same principle, we may safely believe that the Angels of God, those pure and sublime Intelligences, will not indulge in feelings of joy on account of events either insignificant in themselves, or temporary in their duration and consequences. Their joy will not be called forth, as ours too often is, by the mere phantoms of their own imagination; nor will it be produced, as is too frequently the case with the joy of mortals, by superficial and erroneous views of those objects even which have a real existence. It will be founded, doubtless, upon a correct and comprehensive view of the real nature of the event which produces it; and the event will be as much superior in respect of intrinsic importance to the event which commonly excite joy among men, as the intellect of Angels is more comprehensive, and their objects of contemplation more sublime and magnificent, than ours. In considering, then, the nature of the event described in the text as 'the repentance of a sinner,' we may safely lay down as a fixed and guiding principle, that it is an event of great and permanent importance.

But more particularly we assert, that the event described in the text as 'the Repentance of a sinner' is the same thing as the conversion or regeneration of a sinner, that is, a thorough and entire change of moral principles and moral character, produced by the belief of the Gospel. The word Repentance is undoubtedly used in the New Testament in different senses. There is a very unfortunate defect in our translation upon this point, which we believe has contributed very much to produce obscure and erroneous views of the nature of Repentance, and which therefore every one ought to be made aware of. It is the use of the single English word 'repent' as the translation of two different Greek words, which are totally distinct in meaning from each other; and the evil is the greater, that the word 'repentance,' as commonly used by us, most naturally suggests the least extensive and important of the two different meanings expressed by the two Greek words. It would have been better, perhaps, to have used in the one case the words 'reform' and 'reformation,' and have left the words 'repent' and 'repentance' to express the Greek word with the use of which the meaning commonly attached by us to those latter words exactly corresponds. But still there can be no difficulty in proving, even to a mere English reader, that the most common and important meaning of the word 'repentance'—in the New Testament at least—is substantially the same as 'conversion.'—implying one great and entire change of moral principles and character.

It is quite obvious, even on the most cursory examination of the Gospels, that the doctrine of Repentance and reformation comprehended the sum and substance of the preaching of the Gospel, as exemplified both in the preaching of our Saviour and of His apostles. From the way in which they preached Repentance, it is evident that, when their preaching led men to Repentance, the great object of that preaching with regard to these men was effected, that the intention of Christ's interposition with regard to them was accomplished.

Christ's object was 'to save His people from their sins;' and in order to effect this, it was necessary that they should be delivered both from the guilt and from the dominion of sin, that is, that they should be justified and sanctified. Now in the preaching of the apostles we find Repentance mentioned and urged in connection with Justification and Sanctification, in such a way that we cannot but conclude that it deserves substantially the same study as they do,—that it is just a different view of what is substantially the same process,—in short, that they include and imply each other. We find 'repentance' used in the same connection with Faith, which is the immediate instrument, or instrumental cause, of producing on men's state and character all the blessed changes which the Gospel proposes to produce.

Our Saviour, in His instructions to His disciples after His resurrection, directed that 'repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name' (Luke xxiv. 47). Peter addressed the Jews, 'Repent and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out,' where not only are repentance and conversion used to express the same thing, but where the necessary connection between them and 'remission of sins' is expressly stated (Acts iii 19); and the same apostle (Acts v. 31) tells us that Christ was exalted a Prince and a Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.' The Apostle Paul, too (Acts xxvi. 20), in describing his own preaching, says that he 'exhorted men to repent and turn to God, evidently using repentance and conversion as two different names for what was substantially the same thing; and in another passage he tells (Acts xx. 21) that he 'testified both to the Jews and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God. and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ,—where faith and repentance evidently embrace the whole of what the preaching of the Gospel was intended to effect directly upon men. And as we have already seen that there is a close connection between Repentance and Remission of Sins 'so we know that there is a certain connection between Faith and Remission of sins,—the one being the instrument or cause of the other whence we infer, that as there is no mention of Faith in those passages where the connection between Repentance and Remission is stated. Faith and Repentance—though they are certainly not synonymous words—yet include and imply each other.

Thus we see that Repentance, in its most important sense is synonymous with Conversion, or that change of character which is produced once by the belief of the Gospel; and consequently men have no ground whatever for concluding that they have repented, in the sense in which Repentance is connected with all the blessings and privileges of a Christian, merely because they have felt some of

those less important emotions, and gone through some of those less important processes, to which some would restrict the meaning of the word Repentance, and which certainly are sometimes expressed in our English Bibles by that word, though they are never expressed in the Original by the word which occurs in our text, which properly means 'a change of mind.'

But it is said that, even though it be granted that Repentance, in its most important sense, means that Reformation or change of character produced by the belief of the Gospel, and taking place but once, when men come to believe the Gospel, this does not warrant any general conclusion with regard to the magnitude and importance of the change implied in repentance, for that the nature and importance of this change, depending upon the previous character of the individual, must vary indefinitely in degree in different individuals; and that the same strong language, which would be quite proper in describing the Repentance or Reformation or Conversion of a profligate sinner, would be altogether misplaced in describing the same change in a person of respectable moral character and conduct. Now this opinion we believe to be one of the most pernicious, and at the same time one of the most common, delusions by which the devil leads professing Christians to destruction,—by which he makes them disregard the interests of their immortal souls, and 'say to themselves, Peace, peace, when there is no peace,'—and by which he induces them to go on in a state of security and self-satisfaction, which we are afraid is in many cases not broken or disturbed even by the grasp of death and the agonies of dissolution, or by the frown and the stroke of the king of terrors: and which therefore continues 'until in Hell they lift up their eyes, being in torment,'

There can be no doubt that Repentance or conversion, or, in other words, the becoming a Christian—the being brought to the knowledge and belief of the truth as it is in Jesus—produces very different degrees of change upon the external conduct of different men. We believe that there are men in the world who, from their natural dispositions, and the effects of education and of external circumstances, have acted, at least in so far as concerns those parts of their conduct which have come under the view of the world, very much as the belief of the Gospel would have led them to act, and that such persons may be brought to the knowledge and belief of the truth,—may be turned from darkness unto light, from being heirs of hell to being heirs of glory,—in short, may undergo that fundamental change of moral character and principles which is expressed by the words Repentance and Conversion,—without exhibiting to the eyes of men any very great alteration in their external conduct. There can be no doubt also, that Repentance, in the sense merely of regret or remorse for past conduct, is often produced in very different degrees by the belief of the Gospel. But it is a most important scriptural truth, that Repentance, in the sense in which it is used in our text, and in which it is synonymous with conversion,—or that change of moral principles and character produced by the belief of the Gospel,—is, both in kind and degree, substantially the same in all who are ever brought to believe; and that, of course, the difference between the character of believers and unbelievers is, in all the individuals who be-

long to these classes respectively, substantially the same. Nothing can be more clearly revealed in Scripture, than that every individual of the human race is destined, and will in fact attain, to one or other of the States infinitely different from each other,—everlasting happiness or everlasting misery. Now as, under the moral government of an omnipotent and great God, there must, in the ultimate results of things, be an exact, because a necessary, connection between holiness and happiness, and between sin and misery, we are entitled to conclude that the difference in moral principles and character between the two classes of men who will attain to these two infinitely different states will be great and fundamental.

We know, too, from Scripture, that at the great day of Judgment, when the everlasting condition of both classes of men will be immutably determined, the assignation of every individual to the one or the other of these classes will be coincident or correspondent with his moral principles and character; from which we infer that the moral principles and character of all the Human race, in all essential respects and to all intents and purposes, will admit only of a twofold division, and that the difference in moral character between the individuals of these two classes will be so great as to afford sufficient grounds, in the judgment of a holy and heart-searching God, for bestowing upon the one class everlasting Happiness, and consigning the other to everlasting Misery.

But can we not trace this essential difference of moral character to a period antecedent to the conclusion of our state of probation? Now it is a most fundamental principle of that scheme of divine Truth which is held forth in the Standards of our Church, and which we believe to be the true doctrine of Scripture, that the moral principles and character of all the individuals of the race are substantially the same;—that men by nature are all equally in a state of moral corruption and depravity, of ungodliness and alienation from God,—a depravity and ungodliness so great, that if they were left to the freedom of their own will, and the natural operation and development of their original moral principles, without any extrinsic influence, they would be for ever excluded from the enjoyment of God and the happiness of heaven. We are not called upon at present to explain the Origin of this moral depravity attaching to all the individuals of the human race, or to vindicate its consistency with the moral character of God: we must just assume it as a statement of the fact with regard to the actual condition and character of fallen man; and if the fact be as has just been stated, then we have no occasion to inquire into the period or cause of the origin of that moral character which will be found in all those who at the last day will be consigned to everlasting misery. We have just to say, that they have undergone no radical change of moral character during their period of probation; that their original moral character has just been left to its natural operation; and that this is its melancholy result.

The inquiry, then, is limited to the source and production of that essentially different moral character which it has been proved must exist in all those who will be admitted to everlasting Happiness in heaven. The radical and essential change of moral character which these persons must have undergone during their period

of probation, must, like any other effect have an adequate cause. Now what is this cause, and when and how does it operate?

The salvation of all those who will be saved is traceable ultimately to the love of God, in sending his Only Begotten Son into the world, that whosoever believeth on Him should have eternal life. But in what way do men, individually, become interested in the benefits of the Christian Salvation?—through the operation of what means do some men pass from that condition of guilt and depravity in which all are equally by nature, into that essentially different character, as in God sight, which it has been shown must exist in all those who will finally be saved? This, we are warranted by Scripture saying, is done in regard to each individual man by the Holy Spirit, through the belief of the truth,—that is, through the belief of God's revealed character in Christ. The Scriptures uniformly represent the Faith, or belief of the Gospel, as the sole instrumental cause of all those blessed changes, of state and character, which constitute a man a Christian, which give him an interest in the benefits of Christ's Salvation, and made him meet for the kingdom of heaven. We are expressly told that 'whosoever believeth in Jesus Christ shall be saved' from which we are entitled to infer, that Faith either constitutes, or else produces, everything which discriminates those who are saved.

Now, the change of moral principles and character produced by the belief of the Gospel, and which we have proved to be in every individual so great and radical as to be the measure and the justifying ground of the bestowing upon some men everlasting Happiness, and the consigning others, everlasting Misery, is just the very Repentance or conversion which we are attempting to illustrate. Whatever varieties of moral character and conduct different men may exhibit to eyes of their fellow-men, they are all, until they believe Gospel, substantially the same in the sight of that God, one of whose prerogatives it is to be 'the searcher of hearts.' Whatever variety of aspects their moral character may assume, grand principles of their moral nature are the same: their hearts are still under the pervading influence of ungodliness the leading motives that animate them and call forth their desires and affections are only of this world; the course of their thoughts and actions is little influenced by the consideration of the relation in which they stand to God and to Eternity: it would make no real difference in the ordinary current of their thoughts and actions and affections, if God ceased to exist, or if His existence ceased to be an object of belief to their understandings. In short, they live without God in the world. It is this ungodliness or alienation from God, however, reigning in the heart, directing the affections, and controlling the springs and motives of our actions, which, amid all the lesser varieties of moral character and conduct, and even amid those varieties which are of great importance in a civil and social point of view, is still the universal discriminating mark of all those who have not repented and been converted, and who are therefore still walking in darkness and in the region of the shadow of death. The belief of the Gospel, and that alone, through the effectual working of the Spirit of grace, subdues the enmity of our mind to God, implants in us a principle of new Obedience, enables us to love God, who first loved us, and dethrones the world from the supremacy which it

formerly held in our affections. It establishes in our hearts the love of God and of Christ as the great animating principle of our conduct, leading us to devote ourselves, soul and body, to His glory and service, and exists in us 'a well of water, springing up into eternal life.'

It is indeed true that Christians—that is, those who really believe the Gospel—go on making progress in holiness during all their period of probation, even until they 'reach the end of their faith, the salvation of their souls.' But it is equally true, that these continued accessions to their holiness, considered as changes in their character, are not to be compared in importance with that One great change which took place when they first believed in Christ, and which can take place but once,—a change indeed so great, that the Holy Spirit, who dictated the Scriptures, could find no more appropriate language in which to describe it, than by calling it a 'being born again!—a being raised from the dead.' These changes in the character of Christians are but differences in degree, whereas Repentance or Conversion—that great change by which they become Christians—is an essential difference in kind.

We have thus attempted to explain the Nature and Importance of that event or transaction which is described in the text as 'the repentance of a sinner,' and which we are told occasions 'joy among the angels of God.' We have seen what appear to be good scriptural grounds for thinking that it is an event important in its nature and permanent in its consequences; that it is, in fact, the same with Conversion, or that great and entire change of moral principles and character, which takes place when men believe the Gospel. We have seen that this radical change of principles and character—this change of our whole moral nature, from being ungodly and depraved to being holy to the Lord—is one fundamental part of that salvation which Christ came to work out for His people, and of course must have taken place in those whom Christ will acknowledge as His at His coming. We have seen that this radical change is produced, always and certainly, by the belief of the Gospel, that is, by the belief of the truths revealed in Scripture concerning God and Christ; and cannot, under our present economy and constitution, be produced in any other way.

From what has been said, it must appear that Repentance or Conversion, which is essential to salvation, is a very different thing, both in nature and magnitude, from what many professing Christians would have it to be. Having never experienced in their own character any such great fundamental change as we have shown repentance or conversion to imply, they are of course very willing to embrace such views of the nature of that change as may suit their own character, and may be reconcilable with their own experience, and may supersede the necessity of such a change as we have attempted to describe,—a change, the necessity of which, if admitted, they are conscious would assign them their place with those 'who know not God, and obey not the Gospel of His Son.' Some men think that they have repented, because they have regretted and abandoned the sins of their youth—because their passions are less violent and impetuous than they once were—

because their general character and conduct in society are more correct and respectable, and their discharge of all the relative duties of life more unexceptionable, than they once were.

Alas, my friends, these changes do not make the most distant approach to that fundamental change which is implied in repentance or conversion. Repentance is a change proceeding from a Divine principle, and produced by a Divine power; whereas there is nothing in the changes which we have described which is not purely worldly, and produced by mere natural principles. There is nothing in these changes which implies any change in our moral principles, in the character or origin of our motives, or in the objects of our desires and affections. There is nothing which requires or intimates the existence of Christian principles, nothing which can be produced—as is the case with repentance or conversion—only by the belief of Jesus.

Be assured that no change of conduct can be Repentance or Conversion, which is brought about by the mere exertion of our own reason, or the principles of our own moral nature,—which proceeds from any circumstance or combination of circumstances in our situation or condition in the world; for though these circumstances may have been overruled in God's providence for leading us to the true source and principle of repentance, by the belief of the Gospel, they can never themselves constitute that principle.

We are convinced that it is very possible, and not very uncommon, for men who were at one time living in the frequent, and it may be habitual, violation of the plainest duties of morality, to exhibit eventually a course of conduct greatly improved, and quite free from the flagrant immoralities which once distinguished it, without being one whit improved in their great moral principles,—without being at all more godly in their motives, or more holy in their affections,—without being at all more affected in their principles of action by the believing contemplation of God's holiness, and Justice, and goodness, and by the obligation to love and serve and obey their Creator, Preserver, and Redeemer,—and of course without being one step nearer the kingdom of heaven; because no change of conduct can be Repentance or conversion, which does not proceed from a change of moral principles,—from an entire change in our manner of viewing ourselves, and God, and Christ, and Heaven, and Hell. We are afraid that this consideration cuts off the only foundation on which the hopes of not a few professing Christians rest, and leaves them all without any covert from the storm, or shield from the tempest.

Others, to get quit of the necessity of an entire change of moral principles and character, such as is positively asserted in the Word of God, endeavour to modify and explain away the very strong and emphatic language which Scripture uses, when it talks of the necessity 'of being born again,' 'of passing from darkness to light,' of 'being dead in trespasses and sins, and thence being raised to newness of life.' These persons would fain persuade themselves that these words do not really mean so great a change as they seem to imply, and that they must be understood

with some limitation and modification. But this is a notion that rests upon no other foundation than simply their wish that it should be so,—a notion which has not a shadow of reason to support it. And is it not folly in the extreme for any one to peril his soul's salvation—for it is nothing less—upon the bare possibility that God may not actually mean what to all appearance He seems to say?

Besides, there have been many in every age of the world who have loudly asserted that they have undergone a change of moral principles and character, answering the descriptions given of it in Scripture; and without attaching any greater weight to the testimony of these persons than to that of their opponents, considered in their individual credibility, it is quite evident, from the nature of the fact, that one case of accordance between a man's experience and the apparent meaning of Scripture description, is of far more weight in proving that the apparent meaning is the real meaning, than ten thousand cases of non-accordance are in proving that it is not. This too, then, we are afraid, is an unsafe evasion, and a dangerous trifling with the Word of God; and we would earnestly exhort persons who are disposed to have recourse to it, to beware lest they should at last find that their guilt, in remaining and dying in an unconverted state, has been aggravated by their perverse refusal to submit their understanding to plain statements of God's Word.

There is just one other pretence by which men of the world would attempt to save themselves from the admission of the necessity of such a Repentance or conversion as has been described, and one which admits of a very easy answer from an application of the principles which it has already been attempted to establish. It is this: that the very strong language which the Scripture uses in describing the nature of the change implied in Repentance and conversion, and the great difference between a man's state before conversion and his state after it may be very applicable and very just when spoken of the conversion, as it is actually in the Scriptures, of bigoted, and cruel, and hypocritical Jews, or of profligate and immoral Heathens, but that it is not at all applicable to men in the present age and country, who have been born in a Christian land, and have lived in the practice and under the example of all that regard to propriety and external morality which characterizes Christian as distinguished from heathen countries.

Now it has already, we trust, been shown that this supposition proceeds upon a total mistake of the nature of Repentance and conversion, and of the kind of change implied in it; that whatever differences there may be in the conduct and character of unconverted men, when tried by the standard of worldly morality and worldly honour, with reference to the duties they owe to their fellow-men, the essential principles of their moral character in God's sight are substantially the same; that Repentance or conversion is just the same as the becoming a Christian, and is substantially the same process in all who ever become Christians. If it be indeed true, as many seem to suppose, that men are born Christians, that they become Christians by being born in a Christian country, baptized in a Christian church, and professing the Christian religion, then it would certainly follow, even

from the principles which we have attempted to establish, that no such Repentance or conversion as we have described is necessary, because that repentance or conversion, being substantially the same with becoming a Christian, must be already put, though when or how it had taken place it is not easy to conceive, any more than it is to discover traces of the present existence of that character which it implies. But, upon the other hand, we hold, as both Scripture and the nature of the case require us to hold, that all men are born aliens from God, and unholy in their principles;—that whatever may be the conduct and character of different men, with reference to the standards of moral judgment that are current, these ungodly principles remain substantially in their original force, until they become Christians;—that they become Christians only by believing the Gospel, and that the belief of the Gospel certainly produces Repentance or conversion, while nothing else ever produces that great change: then it will follow necessarily, that all the individuals of the human race—in every age and country—in every possible situation—and with every possible variety of previous moral character—who have become Christians, must have undergone substantially the same process, and by the operation of the same means, and that the strong language which Paul uses in describing the change that had taken place upon his Ephesian converts, for example, did not require for its justification the fact, that the Ephesians had been immoral and abominable idolaters, but simply that they had been unconverted, and were now leading a life of holy obedience, and were now Christians—and is therefore equally applicable to all converted men, and to all converted men as such; that is, to all true Christians, and to all true Christians as such.

Thus we see, that no one can upon any good grounds suppose that he is a Christian,—that he has repented and been converted,—and has thus furnished to angels the spectacle which our text tells us excites in their mind a feeling of joy, unless he has undergone an entire change of moral principles and moral character,—a change which is produced by the belief of the Gospel, wherever it exists, and which is directly traceable to that belief as its sufficient and adequate cause. And as upon this change depends our everlasting condition, it is the bounden duty of every one who ever heard it mentioned, to give his utmost attention to the consideration of the question whether or not it has taken place in him. As it is a change which affects the whole principles of our moral nature, our understanding, our affections, and our motives,—in short, the whole objects of our consciousness,—every one at all accustomed to reflect upon what passes within his own bosom, and indeed every one who will but examine himself, can without much difficulty determine the question. It is impossible that such an important change can have taken place upon our moral nature, without attracting our attention, and forcing itself upon our notice.

If the light of the glorious Gospel has shone into a man's heart, surely its illuminating and sanctifying beams must have broken upon his mental eye. If so great an event has been transacted upon the theatre of a man's consciousness, as his acquiring new and most important and affecting views of Himself, of God and Christ, of Heaven and Hell, surely it must be fresh in his memory, and familiar to

his thoughts. And it is to be observed that repentance or conversion, great, and even tumultuous, as may be the change which it implies, bears no analogy whatever to a convulsion or thunderstorm in the natural world, which frequently disappears without leaving any trace of its power or influence behind it. Conversion introduces into our moral nature a permanent and indestructible change—a living principle, over which, at least over its existence, death has no power—which will certainly survive all the chances and changes of this life, and even the separation of the soul and body,—and which, in place of being impaired by death, will then only be completed when the day of our redemption has arrived.

And as the state of perception and belief which repentance introduces is permanent, and even everlasting in its duration, so it is permanent and important in its consequences upon all the departments of our moral nature, and all the branches of our moral conduct. Great as may be the remains of natural corruption, severe as may be the struggles of the old nature in a new-born Christian, much as may be the remaining darkness that obscures his understanding, still, if he be a Christian at all, he has received a new nature, and new principles of action—principles of such powerful and pervading efficacy, that they must make themselves felt upon his affections and conduct. Faith, or the belief of the Gospel, which it has been shown implies repentance or conversion, ‘worketh by love,’ ‘purifying the heart,’ and ‘overcoming the world.’ The flesh that is, natural principles have no longer uncontrolled and undisputed dominion over his heart. A powerful foe, even the law of the spirit of life, is introduced into the field, and commences an irreconcilable struggle with its former lord; ‘for the flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh.’ The struggle may be a long and a painful one—sometimes the old nature may prevail, and sometimes the new. But the issue cannot be doubtful, for it is a subject of divine promise and divine decree. The victories of the spirit over the flesh become gradually more and more decisive, and chequered by fewer reverses, until at last the Man is enabled above the dark valley of the shadow of death, to raise in triumph the banner of complete and conclusive victory. Surely the din and bustle of such a contest, ‘which we are assured in Scripture goes on in the breast of every Christian or regenerate man, must make itself distinctly heard. Clouds and darkness may indeed surround the point of transition from darkness to light, so that many true Christians may not have any very accurate knowledge, or any very distinct recollection, of the time and manner and circumstances in which they were converted by the Holy Spirit, through the belief of the truth that every true Christian should be able to say from his own experience, like the blind man whom our Saviour cured, ‘One thing I know, that whereas I was blind, now I see;’ ‘Sometime, I was darkness, but now I am light in the Lord.’

Thus, then, it would appear, that unless a man be conscious of having undergone a great and radical change of moral principles through the belief of the Gospel,—unless he be conscious that his moral principles are very different now from what they once were, he can hardly have any good grounds for believing that he has repented and been converted,—that has been turned from darkness to light,—that he has got through that process, the sight of which, we are told in the text, occa-

sions joy before the angels of God. He, therefore, whose consciousness does not furnish him with evidence any such great change as we have attempted to describe, has taken place upon himself, ought to hold it as a very strong presumption—if not an actual proof—that ‘he is still in gall of bitterness and the bonds of iniquity,’ that he is still ‘living without God and without hope in the world,’ and has good reason to fear, that if he die in his present condition, he will be doomed to endless misery, and forced to dwell in everlasting burnings,—and he should be stirred by these fearful considerations into anxious concern for the safety of his soul, and a careful inquiry into the true state of his character in God’s sight, and with reference to eternity.

II. With the view of still further exciting your interest and rousing your attention to the consideration of this very important question, viz. whether or not you have repented and been converted, let us proceed briefly to consider, as was proposed, in the second place, the Feelings with which the Repentance or conversion of a sinner is or ought to be viewed.

We are told in the text, that ‘there is joy before the Angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.’ Now this statement, we have already remarked, furnishes a striking illustration of the importance of the Repentance and conversion even of a single sinner. And if you adopt the views of that great event or transaction which we have attempted to lay before you, you can be at no loss to see the propriety and the reasonableness of the Feelings which it calls forth in the breasts of these exalted and glorious Beings. These sublime Intelligences are penetrated through their whole nature with a deep sense of the glory of God. A regard to His glory is the principle that regulates all their affections, and is the source of all their actions; and there burns, too, in their bosom a reflection of that Love to man which prompted God ‘not to spare even His own Son, but to deliver Him up to the death for us all.’

When the Saviour took upon Him the nature of man, the angels sung upon the plains of Bethlehem the hymn of His nativity, ‘Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, and goodwill to men;—intimating that the Incarnation of Christ was the most illustrious display of the glory of God, and of Love to a fallen world, and that they participated and rejoiced in the emotions which that display was calculated to produce. But they feel, at the conversion of every sinner, an emotion the same in kind—though it may be inferior in degree—as that which they expressed upon this ever memorable night: for in the conversion of every single sinner the whole principle of the Gospel scheme of salvation are brought into operation. No sinner ever would have been converted unless the Only-Begotten and Well-Beloved Son had died for his sins upon the cross: and thus in the conversion of every sinner God shows Himself to be Just, and furnishes a manifestation of all His perfections—He takes to Himself His great power—He makes a display of His holiness and of His goodness—in short He manifests all His glory.

The scheme of Redemption has furnished to Angels new and more affecting manifestations of the glory of the Divine character,—manifestations, too, which it transcends even their faculties fully to comprehend; for we are told that ‘they desire to look into it,’—and ‘that by the church is made known to the principalities and powers the manifold wisdom of God.’ And as the scheme of redemption in general engages their eager attention, and furnishes them with more interesting and delightful exhibitions of the perfections of Him to whose glory they are devoted, so every particular application of that scheme, every particular instance of its successful application, will awaken in their bosoms feelings of the purest and the holiest enjoyment.

‘Angels,’ we also are told, ‘are sent forth to minister to those who shall be heirs of salvation.’ and they proceed with alacrity upon their errands of mercy, impelled not only by the principle of love to God, but also by that of love to Man; and having a much more correct and comprehensive knowledge than we have of the importance of Conversion—of the extent of misery from which each individual of the human race is by conversion saved—and of the exceeding weight of glory to which by conversion he is introduced,—they must feel an emotion of high and delightful Benevolence when in any instance their ministrations are successful—when any of those who were heirs of destruction become heirs of salvation—when even one is emancipated from the dominion of Satan, and ‘translated into the kingdom of God’s Son.’

True Christians, those who have repented and been converted—those who know from their own experience that ‘the Gospel is indeed the power of God and the wisdom of God’—as they now act, though very imperfectly, upon the same principles and from the same motives as angels, view the Conversion of a sinner with substantially the same feelings, as a manifestation of the glory of God, and as ensuring the salvation of one of their fellow-men. But their feelings have a more personal, and therefore, in one point of view, a more interesting character: they view the Conversion of a sinner as the deliverance of one of themselves from sin and misery as the birth of a fellow-being to glory—as another trophy of that great victory which He ‘who died for their sins, and rose again for their justification,’ achieved over Satan, and death, and hell—as another jewel added to their Redeemer’s mediatorial crown—as another illustration of the glory of that grace to which they owe all their happiness, and all their prospects of enjoyment—and as the addition of another brother to join with them in heaven in singing the Song of the redeemed. No one can have read the Revelation of John with attention, without having observed the peculiar delight and complacency with which he dwells upon the circumstance of ‘the innumerable company which no man can number, out of every kindred, and people, and nation, and tongue,’ who at the consummation of all things will surround the Eternal, and join in the song of Moses and the Lamb; and every one who has been privileged to look forward with well-grounded hope and expectation to forming one of that glorious assembly, must have felt that the circumstance alluded to constituted one of the most delightful features in the prospect.

But every true Christian feels this emotion in some degree, when he beholds the Conversion even of a single sinner—when he sees another of his fellow-men enrolled among the number of those who are to join ‘the general assembly and church of the first-born.’

Such are the emotions with which the repentance or conversion of a sinner is viewed by God’s Angels and by Good Men. But with what feelings is it viewed by men of the world, or mere nominal Christians? Do they rejoice at the spectacle? No, my friends; they do not rejoice, but they blaspheme. They are aware that those who have become true Christians trace the fundamental change which has taken place upon their character and conduct to the belief of the doctrines of the Gospel, at least as its fundamental cause. And as they imagine that they believe the Gospel as well as their neighbours, and make no account of the operation of the Holy Spirit, they of course suppose that they are placed in the same circumstances and subjected to the same influences as those who make a much greater profession of religion. Besides, as such persons generally consider themselves to be paragons of good sense and sound reason, and find that when placed in the same circumstances, and subjected to the same influences—as they suppose—no such effect is produced, upon their mind as appears and is alleged to be produced, in the case of a few others, they naturally enough are disposed to deny both the reality and the rationality of the apparent and alleged consequences; or, in other words, they ascribe an apparently much more serious religious impression than what they are conscious of in themselves, either to hypocrisy or to weakness of understanding.

But the truth is, that wherever the doctrines of the Gospel are really believed, they will certainly produce those effects which we see in many of those whom the wise of this world denounce or deride as hypocrites or fools; and the absence of those effects, or effects substantially the same as those which men of the world consider to be generally the result of weak and fanatical views of divine truth, is just the most satisfactory proof that the truth as in Jesus has never been thoroughly understood and really believed. And although mere Nominal Christians are generally anxious to reduce those who profess and appear to be under the guiding influence of Christian principle to one or other of the classes which have been referred to, they have often a lurking feeling that this reduction cannot sometimes be very satisfactorily effected. They therefore look upon those who make a profession of Evangelical principles of conduct as thereby throwing a reproach upon them, and indulge towards them, on this point, feelings of malice and envy. There are indeed some examples of men whose whole conduct shows them to have undergone an entire change of character, to be men of the most decided Christian principles, against whom the breath of calumny is almost entirely silent, and who are generally admitted to be men both of sincerity and of sound judgment. But such cases are exceptions to the general rule, and are generally brought about by accidental and insignificant circumstances. And even with regard to these men, it is still a

melancholy fact that they are respected by mere Nominal Christians, or men of the World, not because of their decided Christian principle, but in spite of it.

Men of the world may indeed treat with ridicule and contempt the spectacle of a sinner turning from 'the error of his ways;' but the returning Sinner may console himself with the reflection, that his Conversion occasioned 'joy among all those angels' who have kept their first estate, and among all those of his fellow-men having opportunity of knowing it—whom God has 'turned from darkness to light' Nay, he knows that his conversion has occasioned joy not only to Good Angels and Good Men, but to One higher than Angels. In the conversion of every sinner, 'He sees of the travail of His soul, and is satisfied,' whom all the angels of God are commanded to worship,—with reference to whom the Father has decreed, that to Him every knee shall bow, and every tongue confess, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth,—who sits with the Father, and as the Father's equal, upon the throne,—before whom the most exalted of created beings worship with the profoundest homage. Our divine Redeemer has carried up through these heavens,' even to the heaven of heavens and the Eternal Throne, the nature and the feelings of a man. He still regards with the deepest interest all the concerns of 'that church which He purchased with His blood.' He rejoices when any one of the strayed children of men, whom He came to seek and to save, returns 'to the Shepherd and Bishop of their souls.' He receives him under His special protection, and from that time forward regards him, and provides for him, as a part of Himself, as a member of His body.

'Repent then, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out;' and believe that when you do repent, you will, each of you, occasion 'joy in the presence of the Angels of God.' You will excite a feeling of delight, too, in the breasts of all those of your fellow-men who have obtained like precious faith with yourselves. And you will be received with open arms by Him who loved you, and washed you from your sins in His own blood. He will overrule everything that befalls you in this world for your happiness, and will at last receive you unto Himself, that where He is, there you may be also, and may spend eternity in beholding the glory which the Father hath given Him.