

SERMONS

BY THE

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

THE THIRD EDITION.

LONDON:

PRINTED BY ELLERTON AND HENDERSON,
JOHNSON'S COURT, FLEET STREET:

AND SOLD BY J. HATCHARD, PICCADILLY; AND
RIVINGTONS, ST. PAUL'S CHURCHYARD.

1818.

SERMON XXI.

THE CHRISTIAN'S STATE OF PILGRIMAGE ON EARTH.

HEBREWS xi. 13.

And confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

IT must be allowed, that the Patriarchs and other members of the Jewish Church, before the Christian era, did not enjoy so clear and distinct a view of the nature and blessedness of the life to come as we do; for it was Christ who was to bring life and immortality to light. But, on the other hand, it is evident, that the dispensations of God with many of them were such as tended to give them just views of the vanity and emptiness of this world, and to teach them to desire earnestly that happier state of future existence which was but obscurely revealed to them. Of this we have a striking proof in the course of life which God appointed for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They had been called out of idolatry, as one chosen family to whom God manifested himself with peculiar favour. They therefore eminently appeared as a light shining in the midst of the general darkness which overspread the rest of the world; and their posterity of the Jewish Church, who received their most distinguished privileges through them, and, on their account, would naturally look up to them, and to every circumstance of their lives, with peculiar attention and reverence. To what course of life, then, did God call their father Abraham, his chosen servant? Was it to a life of ease, comfort, and enjoyment? Did he choose for him the most delightful country, subject it to his dominion, and on his account bless it with double fertility? No: Abraham had no land assigned to him, or country which he could call his own. So far different was his lot that he was commanded to quit for ever his native land, his house, his family, his connections, his countrymen; and to wander about in a strange land, dwelling in tents without a fixed or certain habitation. Surely the moral to be learned from this appointment of Providence could not be obscure. It was evidently the design of the Almighty that it should for ever impress on the hearts of his people a persuasion, that it was not in this world that they were to seek their happiness; since Abraham, the friend of God, and the distinguished heir of his blessing, had not found it a place of enjoyment;— but that, sitting loose to this life and all its comforts, as well as all its cares, they were to look forward to another state in which the effects of the Divine favour would be more eminently conspicuous. Had there been no blessings but those of a temporal kind, surely the Canaanites among whom Abraham sojourned,

had been happier than the venerable Patriarch favoured by God himself. They had houses and lands, cities and towns, a country and a people. Abraham had none of these. The conclusion is evident. He could not but “look for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God;” for he that so lives confesses that he is a stranger and pilgrim upon earth, and declares plainly that he seeks “a country. And truly, if he had been mindful of that country from whence he came out,” if he had thought it so desirable a thing to have the blessings of this life, “he might have had opportunity to return; but now he desires a better country, that is, a heavenly; wherefore God is not ashamed to be called his God, for he hath prepared for him a city.”

But did not God *afterwards* give the *descendants* of Abraham a country,—a land flowing with milk and honey, and abounding in cities, high and fenced up to heaven? It is true—he did; but he had first instilled the principle, and given the rule, according to which they were to enjoy it. He had trained them to consider all worldly possessions as worthless, when compared with the blessings of Heaven. Thus they were taught to enjoy as those that enjoyed not; and still to consider themselves as strangers and pilgrims upon earth.

What God teaches to one man he teaches to all. Truth is not to be confined to an individual or to a tribe; it belongs to the universe, and is applicable to all mankind; and when God imparts it in a remarkable manner to any particular person, it is that by his means it may be communicated to many. It was not Abraham therefore, merely, or Isaac, or the Jews that were to consider themselves as strangers and pilgrims here; but all mankind, and especially all Christians. The whole tenor of the Gospel illustrates and confirms this lesson, and impresses it with still more force than even the former dispensation. The address of the Gospel is this:—“Ye are pilgrims and strangers in this world: ye are not of the world, even as Christ was not of the world. Set your affections on things above, not on things on the earth; for” (to put it in a still stronger light, to use an image still more forcible) “ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.”

It is of unspeakable importance to have a practical conviction of this truth. If we have not a just view of the nature of this life, we shall be fundamentally wrong; we shall be wrong, not merely in an immaterial or in a collateral point, but in the very principle from which we act. To have a right knowledge of this life, is as necessary as to know ourselves or to know God.

Let us, then, consider in what respects the image of our being pilgrims and strangers here applies, and what tempers and dispositions it supposes us to possess.

The Christian is a pilgrim and a stranger upon earth, because he is not at home there; has not there taken up his rest; has not obtained there that state of established happiness which alone can satisfy his soul. It is not there that he even desires or seeks his happiness; he is merely passing through the world; his home is in another country, a land afar off, a land glorious and infinitely preferable to this;—there his heart is, there is the rest he earnestly desires, there are concentrated all his hopes of happiness; onward, therefore, he travels; and though sometimes weary with many a painful step through rough and toilsome ways, yet he is revived by the thought of being continually nearer home, and that thought supports him in the tedious journey. When the traveller meets with beautiful prospects, verdant meads, cooling streams, delicious fruits, and hospitable entertainment, they cheer and gladden his progress: he enjoys them as refreshments by the way; but they do not tempt him to loiter, or to forget that he is still far from home. He surveys the countries through which he passes; he observes their manners, he mingles in society with their inhabitants, but still he is not at home: he still feels himself a stranger, whose chief business it is to prosecute his journey through these foreign countries, until he arrives at his own.

Such too, in a general point of view, is the state of the Christian pilgrim. Let us enter more particularly into it, and consider the dispositions and views which, as a pilgrim and a stranger, he is supposed to possess.—He is supposed, then, to have heaven in view, as his *home*. A man's own home is to be considered as the place which, above all others, he values and loves. It is true that other countries may be more beautiful, other houses more convenient and splendid; but the laudable attachment to home, which seems implanted by nature in our hearts, is apt to overbalance every recommendation to which other dwellings can lay claim. Home is the spot where the social feelings reside, where all that is dear and sacred seems to be centred; the secure and peaceful asylum where happiness herself seems to fix her favourite habitation. And in this sense should heaven be the Christian's home. It is to be supposed, therefore, that he knows it well; that he is well acquainted with all its advantages; that he is familiar with the various and exquisite scenes of enjoyment it affords; that it is suited to all his ideas of happiness, and that therefore he looks towards it with longing expectation to be there, as the traveller who, having ascended the summit of some high mountain, and surveyed the extensive prospect around him, fixes his eye upon that point of the horizon where lies his beloved home, and gazes upon it with such intenseness as almost to persuade himself that he perceives the well-known spot to which he hastens.

In this respect, however, it is to be feared, that the greater part of nominal Christians are exceedingly defective. With them, too often, heaven is not a home. They hope, indeed, that when they die they shall go to heaven,

because they believe that it is a place of great happiness; but still, were it left to themselves to choose when they would go there, it would be very long before they went. Were it left to them to choose their seat of happiness, it would not be heaven. They have already a home here; and they value heaven as a kind of representation of that home—lovely on account of its similitude to it, and because every thing which embitters that home will in heaven be removed.

Not so with the real Christian, who is a pilgrim and a stranger here: he dwells, fondly dwells, upon the contemplation of heaven as his true home; and he values it, not on account of its likeness to this world, but its dissimilarity. There he shall be with God and with Christ; there he shall possess a pure and holy nature; there he shall no more be overcome by temptations, or have to struggle with a perverse disposition;—there he shall dwell in a land where God is loved and worshipped, with perfect, cheerful, and constant devotion; where there is knowledge without ignorance, truth without error, and enjoyment without sin. These are the particulars which, from being always desired and frequently contemplated, are deeply engraven on his heart, as constituting the happiness of heaven. Without these, he sees there can be no true felicity; and that country, by whatever distance he may be separated from it, is still his home where he hopes ever to dwell, and to which his fondest desires ever tend.

The idea of our being pilgrims and strangers implies that we are *travelling* towards our home. A stranger, it is true, may sit down and dwell contentedly in a country in which he is an alien; and he may forget his home and native soil; but when the metaphor of a stranger and traveller is used, such a case is not supposed: it implies, on the contrary, that he is active and unwearied, restless and impatient, in the prosecution of his journey, being continually spurred on by the desire of arriving at the place on which all his thoughts are fixed.

Justly does this image illustrate the case of a real Christian. His main business, his chief interest in life, is to attain to heaven. He does not leave it to chance whether he shall arrive there or not; he does not contemplate it as a good about which he is indifferent; but he makes it the first object of his solicitude, as it is that of a traveller to return to his home. For this purpose, he consults the Oracles of Truth with earnest attention, to know the way, as a traveller who has to pass through an intricate and unknown country examines the map: he seeks direction from those who have travelled on the same road: he prays earnestly for Divine guidance: he watches with a godly jealousy against every thing which may retard or obstruct his progress: he is ready to pluck out the right eye, or to cut off the right hand: he esteems not father nor mother, houses or land, in comparison with the salvation of his soul. And as a traveller often feels a gloom when he reflects how far he is

yet from home, or is gladdened when he considers that such a space is passed over; as he mourns when unexpected accidents retard his journey, and rejoices when he can pursue it with uninterrupted rapidity: so the Christian at one time reflects with pain that he has been loitering in his course, or has strayed out of the road, or gone backward in his path; but at another is inclined to hope that he has made considerable progress, and is ready to believe the difficulties of the journey almost over. His hopes and fears, however, both rise from the same source: his success and his disappointment contribute to the same end;—all things tend to increase the desire of home, under the influence of which he still travels steadfastly onward.

But, alas! with how many is the case dreadfully the reverse! How many are there who take no steps in the path towards heaven! Well might our Saviour say the way was narrow, and few there be that find it; for if we judge by the ordinary pursuits, and hopes and pleasures, and fears and pains of the Christian world at large, I fear we shall find but few who are evidently travelling towards heaven as their home. The principal aim of a man's life cannot well be concealed from others;—and when we see a prevailing desire to be rich or comfortable or respectable in this world; when we see men anxious mainly upon points which respect these pursuits, and willing to converse upon no other subjects, and to read no books but such as relate to them; when we see them never apparently interested about their souls, never inquiring with solicitude the way to heaven, never afraid lest they should mistake it, never joyful in the hope that they have made a progress in it; when we see all this, surely we cannot do violence to reason so far as to say, that these men look upon heaven as their home, that they are pressing towards it with the impatience of travellers who are hastening to the end of their journey, or that they are using their utmost efforts to have an abundant entrance ministered to them into the celestial kingdom.

The image contained in my text supposes also, that a truly religious person does not *set up his rest* in this life as if he were at home. He does not build his chief hope of felicity upon the possession of the things of time and sense.—The man of this world has no thought of happiness beyond this life. Exclusively devoted to schemes of earthly enjoyment, he encircles himself with friends, amongst whom he spends his hours of leisure: he contrives amusement, and variety in amusements; and if his sun of prosperity shines unclouded, he is at rest, he has all that his heart can wish. So in idea had the rich man in the Parable, who determined to erect larger barns, and to multiply his stores. But, alas! he who builds his hopes upon this world builds upon the sand. He who expects what God has declared to be hopeless, must be disappointed. God has pronounced a curse upon the earth, and upon the man who looks to it for happiness; and foolish is he who thinks to

evade that sentence. Instead of his being able to say, "Soul, take thine ease," behold the reverse which frequently takes place! Friends are removed, neighbours are contentious, children become disobedient, splendour palls upon the sight, amusement becomes insipid, losses and disappointments succeed, health decays, passions corrode the mind, diseases and pains torment the frame; and the boasted Babel of human bliss crumbles into pieces, leaving only a melancholy ruin as the monument of the folly of the projector.

Not so with the real Christian—*he* confesses himself a pilgrim and stranger here below, and therefore does not build on this world his principal hope. I say, his *principal* hope—for he does not *refuse* the rest, and peace, and other temporal blessings which God has provided for him. He receives them with thanksgiving and gratitude to Him who gave them. But then he does not desire them as his portion. He continually looks beyond them. He travels on to heaven amidst a country smiling with verdure, still valuing his home as dearly as if the scene around him were barren, and the road rough and painful.

The same principle also leads him rightly to estimate the disappointments and troubles of life. Shocks severe to nature are received by him, though not without emotion, yet without despair. When he mourns, it is not as one without hope. He has not lost his all, when he loses much.

However dreary and toilsome the journey, he refreshes himself by remembering the nearness of his home: with whatever opposition he meets, with whatever difficulties he struggles, under whatever embarrassments he labours, his consolation is still, that it is but for a little time, and that he shall soon be at home. "Shall I be dejected," he cries, "because in this journey of a day the accommodations on the road are defective? Am I to despair, because the inn in which I lodge is uncomfortable? O rather let me hasten on my journey, and pursue my ultimate object with more eagerness: in this I shall suffer no disappointment. In heaven will be all the happiness my soul can desire. Gird thyself, then, O my soul; hold on thy way without being dispirited; yet a little while, and ample amends will be made for every suffering. In the mean time, therefore, let not my faith and my patience fail."

This view of the world also serves to give a just estimate of *death*.—To Christian pilgrims what is death? It is the end of their toilsome journey. They have arrived at home: they have reached their Father's house, and are received like children long expected and greatly desired. Should we repine that the fatigues of the journey are over; that the wearisome way which cost many an hour of suffering is now ended; that its difficulties, its pains, its dangers, are now surmounted? Is it a matter of grief that the weary traveller has entered into the rest he has so long desired; that the end, so long pur-

sued, is attained; that the prayers, so often made, are fully answered; that the fears, so often felt, are banished for ever; that the hopes, so often the source of comfort, are now lost in a blessed reality? No! Death in this view is not a scene of terror, but the joyful entrance into bliss: not the extinction of all our pleasures, but the happy termination of every sorrow. “Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord: even so, saith the Spirit, for they rest from their labours.”

To conclude—Much, we see, depends upon the view we entertain of the nature of this life; much of our peace of mind, and still more of our religious progress. Hence, it appears, a worldly mind is far more incompatible with religion than is generally supposed. That it may be an obstacle to piety is commonly admitted; but, in fact, it is much more—it is its absolute destruction. Religion supposes a spirit and temper which cannot consist with a worldly or selfish principle. Hence also we learn the necessity of being principally solicitous for the welfare of our souls. Heaven is a home to those only whose dispositions and views are prepared for it. There must be something heavenly in the state of the temper and inclinations before its enjoyments can be desired. And, above all, there must be a knowledge and love of that blessed Redeemer who has purchased heaven for us, in order to make us meet for it.—Let not the careless and indifferent; let not those who are “lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God;” let not the worldly, the selfish, the sensual, flatter themselves that heaven is their home. They deceive themselves, if they think so. They are of this world, and their nature must be renewed after the Divine image, before they can be admitted into that seat of purity and holiness.—Are we then numbered amongst those who are treading in the steps of Christ, following him as our pattern and guide, studying, as his subjects, to be conformed to his will, purifying ourselves even as he is pure? Never, till this is our true state, can we claim a portion with those for whom he has provided mansions of glory in the world above. Seeing that there remaineth a rest for the people of God, and that we have the promise of entering into that rest, let us constantly entertain a holy fear lest any of us should seem to come short of it; for we are made partakers of Christ, if we “hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end.”