

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 IX.

*HOW ABRAHAM SAW THE DAY OF CHRIST, AND IN WHAT WAY THE
TYPES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT REFERRED TO CHRIST.*

JOHN viii. 56.

*Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day;
and he saw it, and was glad.*

THESE words would, perhaps, be more justly and, without doubt, would be more intelligibly translated thus: "Abraham earnestly desired that he might see my day; and he saw it, and was glad."

This declaration implies, that Abraham had possessed some previous knowledge of the Messiah; that this knowledge, having been in the first instance general and indeterminate, be earnestly "desired to see" the day of Christ more clearly; that he was gratified in this desire; and that when "he saw it, he exceedingly rejoiced."

That Abraham had possessed the general knowledge of the Messiah of which I speak, is probable; because the promise had been made to him, that "in him," that is, in his family or someone sprung from his loins, should "all the nations of the earth be blessed." But he, probably, as yet knew little of the nature of the blessing to be bestowed. This, then, was the point on which he sought to be informed. And he was permitted to understand it. He was favoured with such a view of the nature of that blessing which should come upon all the families of the earth, and of the manner in which it should be communicated. He saw so much of the glad tidings of the Gospel, as to "rejoice" on this account, and be "glad."

I. I propose, in the first place, to consider at what time and in what sense Abraham saw the day of Christ.—The solution of this question must be sought for in that account of Abraham which is given in the Old Testament: for our Lord, in making the declaration in the text, meant to confirm his own authority. But he could not confirm it by offering merely his own unsupported assertion, that Abraham had seen his day. The fact might be true; but if he gave no evidence of it, nothing would be added to the authority of Christ. He might have known this circumstance in a miraculous manner; but if other persons did not know it except by his assertion, their belief of it must have rested entirely upon his word. Our Lord himself inculcated this principle of reasoning at the very moment: "If I honour myself," he said,

“my honour is nothing.” We may conclude, therefore, that our Lord grounded his assertion upon something already revealed in the holy Scriptures.

The history of Abraham, I admit, gives no specific account of his having either desired to see the day of the Messiah, or having been permitted to see it. Indeed, if the Old Testament had spoken plainly on the subject, no occasion would have existed for our Saviour’s remark. But if there is something in the history of Abraham which, though not obvious at first, yet when properly considered, manifests both the desire of Abraham to see the day of the Messiah and his having been permitted to see it, and at the same time affords some peculiar indications that Jesus Christ was that Messiah, then there is a propriety in our Lord’s assertion, and the argument in favour of his own Messiahship is supported by his appeal to the testimony of Abraham.

Prophecy is of two kinds—direct and plain, or indirect and obscure. Of direct prophecies, there are comparatively few; and, for a wise reason, namely, that the event might not be forwarded by man for the purpose of accomplishing the prophecy. What is the use of prophecy? It is not designed to enable mankind to foretell future events; but that, after the events shall have taken place, they may appear to have been foreseen and foretold. An indirect or obscure prophecy is better calculated than a plain one, to answer this general end. It is more free from suspicion, and yet proves as fully the Divine foreknowledge. Accordingly, a great part of the prophecies, especially those relating to the Messiah, were obscure. The event was to be the key which should open and illustrate them.

Whoever has attended to the usual style of our Lord, must have observed, that he was accustomed to make declarations which were at the time mysterious. These were intended to excite reflection and inquiry; and, when comprehended, through subsequent meditation, or the further explanations of our Lord, or illustrated by succeeding events, they were found to contain some most important and interesting truths. The declaration respecting Abraham was probably of this kind. It was intended for the conviction, not so much of those cavilling adversaries who disputed rather than inquired; and who sought to confound him, rather than to be instructed themselves; but of those humble and sincere disciples, who “pondered these things in their hearts,” who were “waiting for the consolation of Israel,” and who gladly received the testimony that Christ was the Messiah. Such persons would be confirmed in their faith by finding, in the history of Abraham, an illustration of some of the principal points in the life and death of our blessed Saviour.

The part of Abraham’s history which affords this illustration is, as I apprehend, that which relates to his intended sacrifice of his only son Isaac. Abraham was, in the first place, called to give the highest possible proof of his obedience to God which could be given; to offer, at the command of

God, a sacrifice, the most painful which could be required of a parent—the sacrifice of his beloved son. And this test to which his faith was put was rendered peculiarly severe by the circumstance of Isaac’s being the son of promise; for it was declared, that “in Isaac should his seed be called.” Here, therefore, both the obedience and the faith of Abraham displayed themselves in the most remarkable manner. His obedience induced him to make the sacrifice; his faith assured him, that when it should have been made, Isaac would again be raised to life from the dead, by the almighty power of God. Such obedience and faith God was pleased highly to reward, making the act by which they were evinced the very means both of manifesting the coming of the Messiah and of satisfying his earnest desire to know the manner in which the world through him should be “blessed;”—so true is it, that when God calls us to great and self-denying duties, however painful may be our apprehensions, he will not fail to sustain us in their faithful discharge.

In ancient times, Divine instruction was often communicated by actions, and these were symbolical of some other event or action. Thus Elisha directed “Joash, the king of Israel, to take a bow and arrows, and to shoot eastward, and to smite upon the ground. And when he smote thrice, and stayed, the man of God was wroth with him, and said, Thou shouldst have smitten five or six times; then hadst thou smitten Syria till thou hadst consumed them: whereas, now, thou shalt smite Syria but thrice.” Of this mode of instruction we have innumerable instances in Scripture;—as where Jeremiah by God’s direction hides the linen girdle in a hole of the rock near Euphrates; where he breaks a potter’s vessel in sight of the people; where he puts on bonds and yokes; where Ezekiel carries out his household stuff, and joins together the two sticks for Israel and Judah; and, to come nearer to the time of Abraham, where Jacob wrestled with the angel during the night. Now, it is probable, that the redemption of Jesus Christ might be pointed out after this symbolical manner, by the sacrifice of Isaac; after the same manner in which it was afterwards pointed out by the brazen serpent in the wilderness. Supposing, then, Abraham to be subsequently instructed by Divine Revelation in the meaning of that sacrifice of Isaac which had been required of him, he would thus learn that the sacrifice which he had found so difficult, was also to be made by the Almighty Father of the world; that as Isaac was the child of promise, so the illustrious Person descended from himself, in whom all the nations of the world should be blessed, would be still more eminently the subject of all the promises and prophecies of God; that as Isaac went to Mount Moriah to be laid upon the altar, so should the Son of God be afterwards offered on that same mountain; that as Isaac carried the wood for his own sacrifice, so should Christ be the bearer of the cross. “So very exact, too, was the parabolic representation, that the duration of the action, viz. three days, was the same as between Christ’s death and resurrec-

tion, both which were designed to be represented in it; and further, that not only the final sacrifice of the Son of God was figured in the commanded one of Isaac, but the intermediate typical sacrifice in the Mosaic economy was represented by the permitted sacrifice of the ram offered up instead of Isaac.”—(*Warburton.*)

II. Allowing this representation to be just, it becomes important, not merely as elucidating some remarkable words of our blessed Lord, but as affording us a key to interpret the manner in which Christ is prefigured in the Old Testament.

If it be true, that such an illustrious Person as the Son of God did indeed come down from heaven, and give his life for the redemption of the world; it might be expected that there would be some antecedent notice of his advent, and that if any revelation were made by God, it would have some reference to Jesus Christ. If there were no such anticipation of his coming, there might be reason to doubt his pretensions. Had there been no previous revelation, there might have been no ground for this doubt; but, if previous revelations had been given, they might naturally be expected to point to Him who was infinitely the most august and glorious subject of prophecy.—This, then, is the sum of my observations. In all the principal revelations of God a reference was made, on every fit occasion, to the Messiah, as the grand object to which the hopes and expectations of man ought to be directed; a reference obscure indeed, but yet sufficiently clear for the purpose it was intended to answer. Thus, in the very first Divine communication made to man after the fall, an intimation was given, that the “Seed of the woman should bruise the serpent’s head.” Instruction of the same kind was afforded by the institution of sacrifice; an institution evidently of Divine appointment;—an institution of which, though the Scriptures give no account of its origin, traces are found in the history before the Flood, and which is employed by Noah as an institution familiar to him. For “Noah,” it is said, “builded an altar unto the Lord, and took of every clean beast and of every clean fowl, and offered burnt-offerings on the altar.” Nothing could afford a more just representation of the great Atonement to be offered for sin than the appointment of sacrifice. We know that it was of the most ancient date, and that it became general through the world, and yet that the nations using it could give no rational account of the grounds of their own practice. The act of immolating an innocent animal appears to have had in itself little tendency to take away the guilt of sin, or render the Deity propitious; yet it was resorted to for these purposes in almost every heathen land. If considered as originally appointed to typify the sacrifice of Christ, the appointment appears at once to be reasonable and judicious.

As we proceed with the sacred history, we find that the true knowledge of God being lost to the world, it pleased the Almighty to reveal himself to Abraham; who received a call to leave his idolatrous relations, and to remove to a land which God would show him. Here was another revelation: and in this there was, first, a promise that Abraham should be the means of blessing the whole earth; next, a promise limited to his descendants by Isaac; then to one individual of those descendants. He was also further instructed by that typical act required of him, of which we have spoken, in what manner all the nations of the world should be blessed in his Seed.

As we advance still further in the Sacred Records, we find that a new revelation was made to Moses with a publicity and splendour and a profusion of evidence before unknown to the world. Here also we may expect to find traces of the great Redeemer; but of what kind did they prove to be? They were still typical. There was an unquestionable reference in almost all the institutions of Moses to the great Author of our salvation. The blood of sacrifices was to be perpetually offered; an high priest was ordained; various rites were prescribed, with a scrupulous particularity of circumstances; and, when the great High Priest had come and offered his perfect sacrifice, all these institutions appeared to have been designed for the purpose of showing, that He who appointed them had in his eye the grand Pattern and Archetype which should afterwards be exhibited to the world.

After this period, God manifested himself to his people by the Prophets.

This was a fuller mode of revelation. By this the will and intentions of the Most High were capable of being declared more plainly. Accordingly the Prophets give far more distinct notice of the Messiah,—of the wonderful manner of his birth,—of the place and the time in which he should appear,—of the family from which he should descend,—of the dignity with which he should be invested,—of the miracles which he should perform,—of the contempt and persecution to which he should be subjected,—of the violent death which he should suffer,—of his resurrection from the dead on the third day, as well as of the nature of his Gospel, the success with which it should be preached, the extent and glory of his kingdom, and the everlasting blessings to be communicated by him to the world. All these things are so intelligibly predicted, that there can be no question as to their reference to Jesus Christ alone.

Thus we see that Abraham, Moses, and all the Prophets give witness to him, and prophesied of his day. Yet it must be remarked, that the reference which they made to him was to the men of their own day *obscure*. It was intended to be so. If the reason of this be asked, that question may be answered by another: Why was not the whole plan of salvation accomplished in the first age of the world? Doubtless the Divine Wisdom saw just reasons for delaying so great a blessing for thousands of years. “In the fulness of

time,” that is, at the best-adapted season, “God manifested his Son.” Now the same reasons which induced the delay of the event might also justify the withholding of full information concerning it. We surely are not competent to determine the degree of light proper to be communicated. The notice was sufficient to answer the intended purpose, although it consisted only in an obscure reference. The Apostle, in remarking on this very point, declares, that “the Law had only a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image.” Its resemblance was like that which the shadow bears to the person, not like that which is afforded by a picture or a statue. It exhibited the great outline, but not every feature of the body. The resemblance was strong in some points. It was not necessary that it should be exact in all.

III. What, then, was the design of the reference to the Saviour? I reply, that it was various. It respected the persons who lived *before our Lord*, those who were his *contemporaries on earth*, and those who *lived after him*.

1. In respect of the *persons living before the time of our Lord*, it seems to have had in view the following ends:—*First*, It served to produce in their minds a general impression, that some great Person was to come into the world, who should be “a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of God’s people Israel.” They were led to transmit this imperfect knowledge from generation to generation; a knowledge perpetually enlarging itself; so that when the illustrious Saviour appeared, there might be a ready apprehension of his character, and a willingness to hail him as the Messiah.—*Secondly*, It was intended to improve and exercise faith; that quality so suited to the state of man, which in the sight of God is of great price, and which is the appointed means of salvation. In this sense the Gospel was preached before to Abraham, and Abraham partook of its blessings: “He believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness.” By faith, every great and glorious action under the Old Testament dispensation was performed; so that the principle, on which the venerable fathers of the Jewish Church acted, was substantially the same as that by which we are influenced, though the object of their faith was less clearly apprehended. It is obvious, that the same object may be more or less distinctly seen, as the object itself indeed may vary, while the principle of faith preserves both its excellency and its vigour. That the members of the Jewish Church did not understand as fully as we the nature of the Gospel Salvation, is unquestionable. But they knew that a great Saviour and Deliverer, the Hope of all the ends of the earth, the Desire of all nations, should arise; and they, like Abraham, looked forward, desiring to see the day of Christ. Like Simeon, they “waited for the Lord’s salvation.” And this principle sanctified their services, as it does ours, and rendered them also “accepted in the Beloved.”—These obscure intimations concerning the Messiah disposed them, in the *third* place, to holy meditation and

devout reflection. They were taught to compare one Revelation, already made, with another—one part of their own Scriptures with another. “They searched what, or what manner of thing, the Spirit of God did signify, when he spake of the sufferings of Christ, and the glory which should follow.” And as this contemplation of the Divine Word was a religious exercise highly acceptable to God, it may have pleased him to bestow, on the more pious amongst them, such Divine illumination as enabled them to comprehend the types and typical actions much more fully than is generally apprehended. God may have rewarded extraordinary obedience and faith with extraordinary light, and thus extended to others the hope and consolation vouchsafed to Abraham.

2. The Divine purpose, as it respected *the Jews living when our Saviour came upon earth*, was somewhat different.—These obscure intimations were gradually discovered to correspond with the scenes of the life and death of Jesus Christ; and thus indicated him to be the great Messiah of whom the Prophets had spoken. To those who believed in Christ they were a powerful confirmation of faith. This, indeed, was the grand argument which convinced the Jews even more than the miracles which he wrought; for the word of the Apostles “mightily prevailed,” when they proved from the Scriptures, that Christ had all the characters of the Messiah, and “that thus and thus it behoved him to suffer, and to die, and to rise again from the dead.”

3. *And, to us*, the ancient testimony concerning Christ answers the same valuable purpose. We now can look back upon a regular connected series of revelations, originating at the creation of the world, and delivered in sundry ways, by different instruments, and at various times, so that it was impossible to suppose any human concert, and yet uniting to prefigure the advent of that Saviour in whom we trust, and the principal events of his life and death. If these descriptive prophecies had been more clear, they might perhaps have been more useful to the Jews to whom they were delivered; but they would have been less convincing to us. Those prophecies, and those prefigurations of Christ, afford the most conclusive evidence to us, which are now seen to refer evidently to Christ, and which yet, previous to their fulfilment, were so obscure, that the coincidence of the event could not have been designed. To us, therefore, provided the application of the prophecy be clear, the obscurity of its terms is an advantage. We do not require information from the types and prophecies respecting the nature of the Messiah. This we sufficiently derive from the writings of the Apostles. The point of importance to us, is the intended reference to Jesus Christ. If that reference be evident, it is of very inferior moment to know in how many particular circumstances it consists.

These observations appear to me important, in suggesting the use to be made of the Old Testament. Errors and prejudices have been entertained, in consequence of not clearly apprehending the character of this portion of Revelation. Some have been staggered because there was so little mention of Jesus Christ. Others have thought, that every passage in it must be strained in order to render it applicable to him. Some pious men, from a high sense of the infinite dignity of Christ, and the importance of his salvation, have put such forced constructions on the words of the Old Testament and the types which it contains, that they have made the subject ridiculous in the eyes of the world. Others have gone into a contrary extreme, and have unreasonably curtailed that evidence which prevailed so triumphantly with the primitive church—that evidence which our Lord himself employed, when, “beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded in the Scriptures the things concerning himself,”—Between these, a line of distinction may be drawn. Let a just idea be formed of the several designs of the types and prophecies. Let it be fully understood, that they could not, and ought not to have been perfectly clear; that this necessary mystery was not to be unveiled, till Christ should come, and the fact explain the prophecy; then I think we shall see, that throughout the Old Testament, there is just that reference to Christ which there ought to be—a reference sufficiently plain for the inferior faith which the pious believers of old time possessed, sufficiently obscure to demand study in the application of it, and yet sufficiently clear to establish the faith and hope of us to whom the Son of Man is revealed.

Whatever contributes to the due understanding of the Oracles of Truth; whatever removes or diminishes the difficulties in them; whatever tends to show the excellence of Scripture, is practical, useful, and important, and may, therefore, be the subject of a ministerial address. This consideration will justify the discussion of a topic not so immediately addressed to the conscience as the subjects which I generally wish to propose.