

THE
WORKS
OF
THE REV . JOHN NEWTON

LATE RECTOR OF THE UNITED PARISHES OF
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CONTAINING
AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &C., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA,
DISCOURSES INTENDED FOR THE PULPIT,
SERMONS PREACHED IN THE PARISH CHURCH OF OLNEY,
A REVIEW OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, OLNEY HYMNS, POEMS,
MESSIAH, OCCASIONAL SERMONS, AND TRACTS.

TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED
MEMOIRS OF HIS LIFE, &c.

BY THE REV. R. CECIL, A. M.

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SERMONS

PREACHED IN THE PARISH-CHURCH OF OLNEY.
BUCKINGHAMSHIRE.

TO THE INHABITANTS OF THE PARISH OF OLNEY.

MY DEAR FRIENDS,

I HAVE principally two motives for publishing these Discourses. The one is, to exhibit a specimen of the doctrine that is taught and most surely believed amongst us, to satisfy those who desire information, and to stop, if possible, the mouth of Slander. I cheerfully submit them to examination, in full confidence that they contain nothing of moment which is not agreeable to the general strain of the word of God, and to the principles of the church whereof I am a minister, as specified in the Articles, Liturgy, and Homilies. And that what I now print is to the same purport with the usual course of my preaching, I doubt not but all who stately hear me, will do me the justice to acknowledge.

My other motive is, a desire of promoting your edification. It is my comfort that many of you live by the truths of the gospel, and highly prize them. You will not, therefore, be unwilling to view the substance of what you once heard with acceptance. But it is to be feared, that the far greater part of the congregation have need to have the things pertaining to their peace pressed upon them again and again, for a different reason; not because they know them, and therefore love to have them brought to their remembrance, but because they have hitherto heard them without effect. For the sake of both, therefore, I am willing to leave an abiding testimony amongst you. I hereby take each of your consciences to witness, that I am clear of your blood; and that, to the best of my knowledge and ability, I have not shunned to declare the whole counsel of God.

In the choice of the subjects I have selected for publication, I have not been solicitous to comprise a succinct scheme of gospel-doctrine, but have given the preference to such topics, which the peculiar circumstances of the times, and of my hearers, make me desirous might be had in continual remembrance.

The exposition of the third commandment, which was first delivered in your hearing, I afterwards preached (nearer the form in which it now appears) at London; and as it led me to touch on some particulars of a very public and interesting concern, I have given it a place in this volume. And I shall think myself happy indeed, if it may please God to give weight to the

testimony of so obscure a person, with respect to a grievance under which the nation groans.

As long discourses are in many respects inconvenient, I have chosen to publish no more than a brief summary of what you heard more at large from the pulpit. And as I aim to speak plain truths to a plain people, I have purposely avoided any studied ornaments in point of expression, being desirous to accommodate myself to the apprehensions of the most ignorant.

May it please the God of all grace to accompany my feeble endeavours to promote the knowledge of his truth with the powerful influence of his Holy Spirit! And I earnestly entreat all who know how to draw near to a throne of grace by Jesus Christ, to strive mightily in prayer for me, that I may stand fast in the faith, and increase in the knowledge of Jesus the Saviour, and that, for his sake, I may labour, without fear of fainting, in the service to which he has been pleased to call me. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all!

I am your affectionate friend, and servant in the gospel of Christ,

JOHN NEWTON.

Olney, January 20, 1767.

SERMON III.

OF THOSE FROM WHOM THE GOSPEL-DOCTRINES ARE HID.

At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. MATTH. xi. 25.

THE judgments of God are a great deep. He does not give us a full account of his matters; much less can we by searching find out him to perfection; yet if we carefully attend to what he has revealed, and apply his written word with humility and caution to what passes in ourselves, and around us, we may by his grace attain to some considerable satisfaction in things which at first view seem hard to be understood. The subject of my text is of this nature. That God should hide things of everlasting consequence from any person, sounds very harsh; but I hope, when the words are explained, we shall see, that though he acts as a sovereign in his dispensations, his ways are just, and good, and equal. We have already made an entrance upon this attempt. Besides some general observations in my first discourse, I endeavoured to show you, in the second, 1. What the things are to which our Lord refers; 2. Where, and in what sense they are hid. I proceed now to consider,

III. From whom they are hid,—the wise and prudent. It will, I think, be readily supposed, that the expression does not mean those who are truly so and in God's account. He esteems none to be wise and prudent but those who are enlightened with his spiritual wisdom, who now serve and love him in Christ. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning (or, as the word likewise signifies, the head or principal part) of wisdom" (Psalm cxi. 10); and from such as these he hides or keeps back nothing that is profitable for them: on the contrary, that promise is sure, "The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him; and he will show them his covenant," Psalm xxv. 14. When our Lord said, "The children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light" (Luke xvi. 8.), he did not mean they were so absolutely, for their boasted wisdom is the merest folly, but only that they acted consistently with their own principles. The wise and prudent here are either those who are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight, or those who are generally so reputed by the bulk of mankind. And these two amount to the same: for as the natural wisdom of man springs from the same fountain, self, and is confined to the same bounds, the things of time and sense, in all alike (though there is variety of pursuits within these lim-

its, as tempers and situations differ), men are generally prone to approve and applaud those who act upon their own principles.

We may take notice, then, as a key to this inquiry, that what is accounted wisdom by the world, is not only different from the wisdom of God, but inconsistent with it, and opposite to it. They differ as fire and water, light and darkness; the prevalence of the one necessarily includes the suppression of the other. See this at large insisted on by St. Paul, in the beginning of his first epistle to the Corinthians, the first, second, and third chapters.

Who, then, are the wise and prudent intended in my text? May the Holy Spirit enable every conscience to make faithful application of what shall be offered upon this head.

1. In the judgment of the world, those are wise and prudent persons who are very thoughtful and diligent about acquiring wealth, especially if their endeavours are crowned with remarkable success. If a man thrives (as the phrase is) from small beginnings, and joins house to house, and field to field, so that he has lands to call after his own name, and large possessions to leave to his children, how is he applauded (though at the same time envied) by the most who know him! I do not deny, that a proper concern and industry in our secular calling, is both lawful and our duty; and I allow, that the providence of God does sometimes remarkably prosper those who depend on him in the management of their business; but I make no scruple to affirm, that where this is the main concern (as some call it), such wisdom is madness. Such persons are no less idolaters than those who worship stocks and stones. And if the things of God are hid from them, it is surely their own fault: they do not even complain of it as a hardship; they have their choice, their reward, and are satisfied. They are told that these things are in Christ, and there they are content that they should remain. They see no beauty nor suitableness in them, they have no desire after him; he might keep his heaven and truths to himself, if they could always have their fill of the world. They are told that these things are hid in the scriptures, but they have neither leisure nor inclination to search there for them. Their time is taken up with buying and selling, building and planting, &c. O, beware of this wisdom! “What will riches profit you in the day of wrath” (Prov. xi. 4), at death, or judgment? If you live and die in this spirit, you will bemoan your choice when it is too late.

2. Those are accounted wise and prudent, who think they have found a way to reconcile God and the world together. If a man should attempt to fly, or to walk upon the water, he would be deemed a fool. How is it that this endeavour, which is equally impossible (and expressly declared so by our Lord), should be more favourably thought of? The deceitfulness of the heart and the subtlety of Satan concur in this point. You will have a sort of

religion, but then you take care not to carry things too far. You are governed by the fear and regard of men. Something you will do to satisfy conscience, but not too much, lest you hurt your interest, disoblige your friends, or draw on yourselves reproach, or a bad name. I must tell you from the word of God, your attempt to halve things is an abomination in his sight. Would it not be treason by the law, to pay the king an outward respect, and yet hold secret correspondence with his enemies? The decisions of the word of God are to the same effect in this instance. "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him," 1 John ii. 15. "Know ye not, that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever, therefore, will be a friend of the world, is the enemy of God," James iv. 4.

3. A man is deemed wise, who has considerable knowledge and curiosity about natural things, and all those subjects which usually bear the name of science; if he can talk of the magnitudes, distances, and motions of the heavenly bodies, can foretell an eclipse, has skill in mathematics, is well read in the history of ancient times, and can inform you what is found in books concerning the folly and wickedness of mankind who lived some thousands of years ago; or if he understands several languages, and can call a thing by twenty different names. It is true, when these attainments are sanctified by grace, they may, in some respects, have their use. But, in general, the best use a believer will or can make of them, is to lay them down at the foot of the cross. When a man, possessed of a great quantity of these pebbles, has his conscience awakened, and his understanding enlightened, he is glad to renounce them all for the pearl of great price, and to adopt the apostle's determination, "to know nothing but Jesus Christ, and him crucified," 1 Cor. ii. 2. This was the effect when the word of God mightily grew and prevailed, Acts xix. 19. We may at least say, that this kind of wisdom is for the most part dangerous and blinding to the soul.

1st, It tends to feed and exalt self, to make a person something in his own eyes. This we are prone enough to by nature. An increase of unsanctified knowledge adds fuel to the fire.

2dly, It engrosses the time and thoughts. Our minds are narrow, capable of attending to but few things at once; and our span is short, and will hardly admit of many excursions from the main concern. If we were to live to the age of Methuselah, we might pursue some things which at present are highly improper and impertinent, from this consideration alone. A man that is upon an urgent affair of life and death, has no leisure for amusement. Such is our situation.. We are creatures of a day. Time is vanishing, and eternity is at stake.

3dly, The delusion here is specious, and not easily discovered. A person with these accomplishments is not always enslaved to money or to sensual pleasures: he therefore pities those who are, and comparing himself with others, supposes he is well employed because his favourite studies are a check upon his appetites, and prevents his selling himself for gold, or running into riot with the thoughtless. Yet an attachment of this sort equally blinds him with respect to his true interest. Will the knowledge of books, or men, or stars, or flowers, purify the conscience from dead works, to serve the living God? It is too plain, that the truths of the gospel are hid from none more effectually than from many of this character. None cast a more daring or public slight upon the revealed will of God than some who are admired and applauded on account of their knowledge and learning.

4. Your nice and curious reasoners and disputers, that will see (as they profess) the bottom of everything, and trust to their own judgment and inquiries, independent of the Spirit of God, are another sort of wise persons from whom these things are often and justly hid. And this character may be found in many, both learned and unlearned; for many have good natural faculties, who have not had the advantages of learning and education. But this spirit is directly contrary to that simplicity, dependence, and obedience of faith, which the scriptures exhort us to seek after. Its effects are various:

1st, Some (and those not a few) are led to reject the word of God altogether, because it evidently contains many things above and contrary to their vain imaginations. And herein they contradict the most obvious principles of that reason which they lay claim to. A revelation from God can only be thought necessary or probable, but on the supposition that it is to inform us of something which we could not have known without it. Therefore, to pretend to try the scripture-claim to this character by such criteria or marks as we possess beforehand, is the same thing in effect as to determine to reject it without any trial at all.

2dly, When the scriptures, as to the letter, are acknowledged to be true, persons of this turn, presuming themselves sufficient judges of the sense, are helped by their ingenuity to explain away all the sublime doctrines of truth, so as to suit the prejudices and apprehensions of their own carnal minds. This, especially when joined with a smattering of learning, has been the chief source of all the errors and heresies which have pestered the church of God in all ages. This is a principal cause why the depravity of man by nature, the deity and atonement of Christ, the operations of the Holy Spirit, and all the doctrines of grace, have been denied by men wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight, though evidently contained in the book which they profess to receive as of divine inspiration.

3dly, Even where the doctrines of grace have been notionally received, the same spirit of wisdom can still find occasion to work. When there is more knowledge in the head than experience in the heart, many and various are the evils that often ensue. Disputes and hard questions are started, contentions and divisions multiplied, and people are more eager to perplex others than to edify themselves. Thus the name and counsels of God are profaned by an irreverent curiosity, and the clear, express declarations of his will darkened by words without knowledge. When this natural wisdom puts on a spiritual appearance, no persons are more fatally deceived, or more obstinately hardened. They think they can learn no more, but are wise enough to teach every one: they neglect the use of God's appointed means themselves, and despise them in others: they are proud, censorious, obstinate, and full of conceit. Take care of Satan at all times, but especially when he would transform himself into an angel of light. There is reason to think the things of God are entirely hid, as to their power and excellence, from some who fondly dream that none are acquainted with them but themselves.

The consideration of this subject may lead to a variety of improvement. It may teach you,

1. What to fear,—A worldly spirit. This in a prevailing degree is inconsistent with a work of grace, and, in whatever degree it obtains, or is indulged, will proportionably retard and abate the light and comfort of our souls. The cares and pleasures of this life are by our Lord compared to thorns (Matthew xiii. 22), unprofitable and painful; they produce no fruit, but they wound and tear. Yea, they are thorns in the eyes (Josh. xxiii. 13), which will prevent the great things of God from being perceived.—A spirit of self-dependence. “Be not wise in your own conceits,” Rom. xii. 16. “If any man think that he knoweth anything, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know,” 1 Cor. viii. 2. God giveth wisdom to the lowly, but he confounds the devices of the proud. His promises of teaching, leading, and guiding, are made to the meek, the simple, and those who are little in their own eyes.

2. What to pray for,—A simple, child-like temper, that you may come to the word as to the light, and look beyond yourselves for the assistance of the Holy Spirit, without which your most laboured inquiries will only mislead you farther and farther from the truth.

3. How to examine yourselves,—Not by your notions and attainments in knowledge, for these you may have in a considerable degree, and be wholly destitute of true grace. The word of God supposes it possible that persons may have great gifts (1 Cor. xiii. 1–3), flaming zeal, and much success, and yet, having no true love to God, be in his sight no better than sounding

brass or a tinkling cymbal. But if you would know your state, examine by your prevailing desires. Are your notions of grace effectual to lead you in the path of duty? Do you hunger and thirst for an increase of holiness? Does the knowledge you have of Christ lead you to love and trust him? Are you poor in spirit? You know nothing aright if you know not yourselves.

4. Ye that are believers may see cause to praise the Lord for his dispensations towards you.

1st, Had you been wise in men's esteem, you might have continued fools to the end of your lives. If the Lord has taught you the secret of them that fear him; if he has shown you the way of salvation; if he has directed your feet in the paths of his commandments;—then you have the true wisdom, which shall be your light through life, and in death your glory. Therefore,

2dly, Be not grieved that ye are strangers to human wisdom and glory. These things which others so highly prize, you may resign contentedly, and say, Lord, it is enough if thou art mine. Nay, you have good reason to praise his wisdom and goodness for preserving you from those temptations which have ensnared and endangered so many.

3dly, Do you desire more of this true wisdom? Seek it in the same way in which you have received the first beginnings. Be frequent and earnest in secret prayer. Study the word of God, and study it not to reconcile and make it bend to your sentiments, but to draw all your sentiments from it, to copy it in your heart, and express it in your conduct. Be cautious of paying too great a regard to persons and parties. One is your master, even Christ. Stand fast in the liberty with which he has made you free, and while you humbly endeavour to profit by all, do not resign your understanding to any but to him who is the only wise God, the only effectual and infallible teacher. Compare the experience of what passes within your own breast with the observations you make of what daily occurs around you, and bring all your remarks and experiences to the touch-stone of God's holy word. Thus shall you grow in knowledge and in grace; and, amidst the various discouragements which may arise from remaining ignorance in yourselves or others, take comfort in reflecting that you are drawing near to the land of light, where there will be no darkness at all. Then you shall know as you are known; your love and your joy shall likewise be perfect, and you shall be satisfied with the rivers of pleasure which are before the throne of God, world without end.