

THE
WORKS
OF
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LOMBARD STREET, LONDON.

CONTAINING
AN AUTHENTIC NARRATIVE, &C., LETTERS ON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS, CARDIPHONIA, DIS-
COURSES 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.

COMPLETE IN ONE VOLUME.

EDINBURGH

Printed at the University Press, for

PETER BROWN AND THOMAS NELSON.

1830.

LETTER XXI.

“I WAS ONCE BLIND, BUT NOW I SEE.”

DEAR SIR,

THE question, What is the discriminating characteristic nature of a work of grace upon the soul? has been upon my mind; if I am able to give you satisfaction concerning it, I shall think my time well employed.

The reason why men in a natural state are utterly ignorant of spiritual truths, is, that they are wholly destitute of a faculty suited to their perception. A remarkable instance we have in the absurd construction which Nicodemus put upon what our Lord had spoken to him concerning the new birth. And in the supernatural communication of this spiritual faculty, by the agency of the Holy Spirit, I apprehend the inimitable and abiding criterion, which is the subject of our inquiry, does, primarily consist. Those passages of scripture wherein the gospel-truth is compared to light, lead to a familiar illustration of my meaning. Men, by nature, are stark blind with respect to this light; by grace the eyes of the understanding are opened. Among a number of blind men, some may be more ingenious and of better capacity than others. They may be better qualified for such studies and employments which do not require eye-sight, than many who can see, and may attain to considerable skill in them; but with respect to the true nature of light and colours, they are all exactly upon a level. A blind man, if ingenious and inquisitive, may learn to talk about the light, the sun, or the rainbow, in terms borrowed from those who have seen them; but it is impossible that he can have (I mean a man born blind) a just idea of either; and whatever hear-say knowledge he may have acquired, he can hardly talk much upon these subjects without betraying his real ignorance. The case of one mentioned by Mr. Locke has been often quoted. He believed, that after much inquiry and reflection, he had at last found out what scarlet was; and being asked to explain himself, “I think,” says he, “scarlet has something like the sound of a trumpet.” This man had about the same knowledge of natural light as Nicodemus had of spiritual. Nor can all the learning or study in the world enable any person to form a suitable judgment of divine truth, till the eyes of his mind are opened, and then he will perceive it at once.

Indeed this comparison is well suited to show the entire difference between nature and grace, and to explain the ground of that enmity and scorn which fills the hearts of blinded sinners, against those who profess to have been enlightened by the Spirit of God. The reason why blind men are not affronted when we tell them they cannot see, seems to be, that they are borne down by the united testimony of all who are about them. Everyone

talks of seeing; and they find by experience, that those who say they can see can do many things which the blind cannot. Some such conviction as this many have, who live where the gospel is preached, and is made the power of God to the salvation of others. The conversation and conduct of the people of God convinces them, that there is a difference, though they cannot tell, wherein it consists. But if we would suppose it possible, that there was a whole nation of blind men, and one or two persons should go amongst them, and profess that they could see, while they could not offer them such a proof of their assertion as they were capable of receiving, nor even explain, to their satisfaction, what they meant by sight; what may we imagine would be the consequence? I think there is little doubt but these innovators would experience much the same treatment as the believers of Jesus often meet with from a blind world. The blind people would certainly hate and despise them for presuming to pretend to what they had not. They would try to dispute them out of their senses, and bring many arguments to prove, that there could be no such thing as either light or sight. They would say, as many say now, How is it if these things are so, that we should know nothing of them? Yea, I think it probable, they would rise against them as deceivers and enthusiasts, and disturbers of the public peace, and say, "Away with such fellows from the earth; it is not fit that they should live." But if we should suppose further, that during the heat of the contest, some of these blind men should have their eyes suddenly opened, the dispute as to them would be at an end in a minute: they would confess their former ignorance and obstinacy, confirm the testimony of those whom they had before despised, and of course share in the same treatment from their blind brethren, perhaps be treated still worse, as apostates from the opinion of the public.

If this illustration is justly applicable to our subject, it may lead us to several observations, or inferences, which have a tendency to confirm what we are elsewhere expressly taught by the word of God.

In the first place, it shows, that regeneration, or that great change without which a man cannot see the kingdom of God, is the effect of almighty power. Neither education, endeavours, or arguments, can open the eyes of the blind. It is God alone, who at first caused light to shine out of darkness, who can shine into our hearts "to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." People may attain some natural ideas of spiritual truths by reading books, or hearing sermons, and may thereby become wise in their own conceits: they may learn to imitate the language of an experienced christian; but they know not what they say, nor whereof they affirm, and are as distant from the true meaning of the terms, as a blind man who pronounces the words blue or red, is from the ideas which those words raise in the mind of a person who can distinguish col-

ours by his sight. And from hence we may infer the sovereignty as well as the efficacy of grace; since it is evident, not only that the objective light, the word of God, is not afforded universally to all men; but that those who enjoy the same outward means have not all the same perceptions. There are many who stumble in the noon-day, not for want of light but for want of eyes; and they who now see, were once blind even as others, and had neither power nor will to enlighten their own minds. It is a mercy, however, when people are so far sensible of their own blindness as to be willing to wait for the manifestation of the Lord's power, in the ordinances of his own appointment. He came into the world, and he sends forth his gospel, that those who see not may see; and when there is a desire raised in the heart for spiritual sight, it shall in his due time be answered.

From hence likewise we may observe the proper use and value of the preaching of the gospel, which is the great instrument by which the Holy Spirit opens the blind eyes. Like the rod of Moses, it owes all its efficacy to the appointment and promise of God. Ministers cannot be too earnest in the discharge of their office; it behoves them to use all diligence to find out acceptable words, and to proclaim the whole counsel of God. Yet when they have done all, they have done nothing, unless their word is accompanied to the heart by the power and demonstration of the Spirit. Without this blessing, an apostle might labour in vain: but it shall be in a measure afforded to all who preach the truth in love, in simplicity, and in an humble dependence upon him who alone can give success. This, in a great measure, puts all faithful ministers on a level, notwithstanding any seeming disparity in gifts and abilities. Those who have a lively and pathetic talent may engage the ear, and raise the natural passions of their hearers; but they cannot reach the heart. The blessing may be rather expected to attend the humble than the voluble speaker.

Further we may remark, that there is a difference in kind, between the highest attainments of nature, and the effects of grace in the lowest degree. Many are convinced, who are not truly enlightened; are afraid of the consequences of sin, though they never saw its evil; have a seeming desire of salvation, which is not founded upon a truly spiritual discovery of their own wretchedness, and the excellency of Jesus. These may, for a season, hear the word with joy, and walk in the way of professors; but we need not be surprised if they do not hold out, for they have not root. Though many shall fall, the foundation of God still standeth sure. We may confidently affirm, upon the warrant of scripture, that they who, having for a while escaped the pollutions of the world, are again habitually entangled in them, or who, having been distressed upon the account of sin, can find relief in a self-righteous course, and stop short of Christ, "who is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believeth;" we may affirm, that these,

whatever profession they may have made, were never capable of receiving the beauty and glory of the gospel-salvation. On the other hand, though where the eyes are divinely enlightened, the soul's first views of itself and of the gospel may be confused and indistinct, like him who saw men as it were trees walking; yet this light is like the dawn, which, though weak and faint at its first appearance, shineth more and more unto the perfect day. It is the work of God; and his work is perfect in kind, though progressive in the manner. He will not despise or forsake the day of small things. When he thus begins, he will make an end; and such persons, however feeble, poor, and worthless, in their own apprehensions, if they have obtained a glimpse of the Redeemer's glory, as he is made unto us, of God, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, so that his name is precious, and the desire of their hearts is towards him, have good reason to hope and believe, as the wife of Manoah did in a similar case, that if the Lord had been pleased to kill them, he would not have showed them such things as these.

Once more, this spiritual sight and faculty is that which may be principally considered as inherent in a believer. He has no stock of grace, or comfort, or strength, in himself. He needs continual supplies; and if the Lord withdraws from him, he is as weak and unskilful, after he has been long engaged in the Christian warfare, as he was when he first entered upon it. The eye is of little present use in the dark; for it cannot see without light. But the return of light is no advantage to a blind man. A believer may be much in the dark; but his spiritual sight remains. Though the exercise of grace may be low, he knows himself, he knows the Lord, he knows the way of access to a throne of grace. His frames and feelings may alter; but he has received such a knowledge of the person and offices, the power and grace, of Jesus the Saviour, as cannot be taken from him; and could withstand even an angel that should preach another gospel, because he has seen the Lord.—The paper constrains me to break off. May the Lord increase his light in your heart, and in the heart of, &c.