

THE
WORKS
OF
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LOMBARD STREET, LONDON.

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.

COMPLETE IN ONE VOLUME.

EDINBURGH

Printed at the University Press, for

PETER BROWN AND THOMAS NELSON.

1830.

LETTER XXVIII.

ANSWER TO THE QUESTION, IN WHAT MANNER ARE WE TO EXPECT THE LORD'S PROMISED GUIDANCE, TO INFLUENCE OUR JUDGMENTS, AND DIRECT OUR STEPS IN THE PATH OF DUTY?

DEAR SIR,

IT is well for those who are duly sensible of their own weakness and fallibility, and of the difficulties with which they are surrounded in life, that the Lord has promised to guide his people with his eye, and to cause them to bear a word behind them, saving, "This is the way, walk ye in it," when they are in danger of turning aside either to the right hand or to the left. For this purpose he has given us the written word to be a lamp to our feet; and encouraged us to pray for the teaching of his Holy Spirit, that we may rightly understand and apply it. It is, however, too often seen, that many widely deviate from the path of duty, and commit gross and perplexing mistakes, while they profess a sincere desire to know the will of God, and think they have his warrant and authority. This must certainly be owing to misapplication of the rule by which they judge, since the rule itself is infallible, and the promise sure. The scriptures cannot deceive us, if rightly understood; but they may, if perverted, prove the occasion of confirming us in a mistake. The Holy Spirit cannot mislead those who are under his influence; but we may suppose that we are so, when we are not. It may not be unreasonable to offer a few thoughts upon a subject of great importance to the peace of our minds, and to the honour of our holy profession.

Many have been deceived as to what they ought to do, or in forming a judgment beforehand of events in which they are nearly concerned, by expecting direction in ways which the Lord has not warranted.—I shall mention some of the principal of these, for it is not easy to enumerate them all.

Some persons, when two or more things have been in view, and they could not immediately determine which to prefer, have committed their case to the Lord by prayer, and have then proceeded to cast lots; taking it for granted, that after such a solemn appeal, the turning up of the lot might be safely rested in as an answer from God. It is true, the scriptures, and indeed, right reason assures us, that the Lord disposes the lot; and there are several cases recorded in the Old Testament, in which lots were used by divine appointment; but I think neither these, nor the choosing Matthias by lot to the apostleship, are proper precedents for our conduct. In the division of the land of Canaan, in the affair of Achan, and in the nomination of Saul to the kingdom, recourse was had to lots by God's express command. The instance of Matthias likewise was singular, such as can never happen again, namely, the choice of an apostle, who would not have been upon a par with the rest, who were chosen immediately by the Lord, unless He had been pleased to interpose in some extraordinary way; and all these were before the canon of scripture was completed, and before the full descent and communication of the Holy Spirit, who has promised to dwell with the church to the end of time. Under the New Testament dispensation, we are invited to come boldly to the throne of grace, to make our request known to the Lord, and to cast our cares upon him: but

we have neither precept nor promise, respecting the use of lots; and to have recourse to them without his appointment, seems to be tempting him rather than honouring him, and to savour more of presumption than dependence. The effects likewise of this expedient, have often been unhappy and hurtful. A sufficient proof how little it is to be trusted to as a guide of our conduct,

Others, when in doubt, have opened the Bible at a venture, and expected to find something to direct them, in the first verse they should cast their eye upon. It is no small discredit to this practice, that the heathens who knew not the Bible, used some of their favourite books in the same way; and grounded their persuasions of what they ought to do, or of what should befall them, according to the passage they happened to open upon. Among the Romans, the writings of Virgil were frequently consulted upon these occasions; which gave rise to the well-known expression of the *Sortes Virgilianae*. And indeed Virgil is as well adapted to satisfy inquirers in this way, as the Bible itself; for if people will be governed by the occurrence of a single text of scripture, without regarding the context, or duly comparing it with the general tenor of the word of God, and with their own circumstances, they may commit the greatest extravagances, expect the greatest impossibilities, and contradict the plainest dictates of common sense, while they think they have the word of God on their side. Can the opening upon 2 Samuel vii. 3. when Nathan said unto David, “Do all that is in thine heart, for the Lord is with thee,” be sufficient to determine the lawfulness or expediency of actions? Or can a glance of the eye upon our Lord’s words to the woman of Canaan, Matthew xv. 28. “Be it unto thee even as thou wilt,” amount to a proof, that the present earnest desire of the mind (whatever it may be) shall be surely accomplished? Yet it is certain that matters, big with important consequences, have been engaged in, and the most sanguine expectations formed, upon no better warrant than dipping (as it is called) upon a text of scripture.

A sudden strong impression of a text, that seems to have some resemblance to the concern upon the mind, has been accepted by many as an infallible token that they were right, and that things would go just as they would have them; or, on the other hand, if the passage bore a threatening aspect, it has filled them with fears and inquietudes, which they have afterwards found were groundless and unnecessary. These impressions, being more out of their power than their former method, have been more generally regarded and trusted to, but have frequently proved no less delusive. It is allowed, that such impressions of a precept or a promise, as humble, animate, or comfort the soul, by giving it a lively sense of the truth contained in the words, are both profitable and pleasant; and many of the Lord’s people have been instructed and supported (especially in a time of trouble) by some seasonable word of grace applied and sealed by his Spirit with power to their hearts. But if impressions or impulses are received as a voice from heaven, directing to such particular actions as could not be proved to be duties without them, a person may be unwarily misled into great evils, and gross delusions; and many have been so. There is no doubt but the enemy of our souls, if permitted, can furnish us with scriptures in abundance in this way, and for these purposes.

Some persons judge of the nature and event of their designs, by the freedom which they find in prayer. They say, they commit their ways to God, seek his di-

rection, and are favoured with much enlargement of spirit; and therefore they cannot doubt but what they have in view is acceptable in the Lord's sight. I would not absolutely reject every plea of this kind, yet without other corroborating evidence I could not admit it in proof of what it is brought for. It is not always easy to determine when we have spiritual freedom in prayer. Self is deceitful; and when our hearts are much fixed and bent upon a thing, this may put words and earnestness into our mouths. Too often we first secretly determine for ourselves, and then come to ask counsel of God; in such a disposition we are ready to catch at everything that may seem to favour our darling scheme: and the Lord, for the detection and chastisement of our hypocrisy (for hypocrisy it is, though perhaps hardly perceptible to ourselves), may answer us according to our idols; see Eze-kiel xiv. 3, 4. Besides, the grace of prayer may be in exercise, when the subject-matter of the prayer may be founded upon a mistake, from the intervention of circumstances which we are unacquainted with. Thus, I may have a friend in a distant country: I hope he is alive, pray for him, and it is my duty so to do. The Lord, by his Spirit, assists his people in what is their present duty. If I am enabled to pray with much liberty for my distant friend, it may be a proof that the Spirit of the Lord is pleased to assist my infirmities, but it is no proof that my friend is certainly alive at the time I am praying for him and if the next time I pray for him I should find my spirit straitened, I am not to conclude that my friend is dead, and therefore the Lord will not assist me in praying for him any longer.

Once more, a remarkable dream has sometimes been thought as decisive as any of the foregoing methods of knowing the will of God. That many wholesome and seasonable admonitions have been received in dreams, I willingly allow; but though they may be occasionally noticed, to pay a great attention to dreams, especially to be guided by them, to form our sentiments, conduct our expectations upon them, is superstitious and dangerous, The promises are not made to those who dream, but to those who watch.

Upon the whole, though the Lord may give to some persons, upon some occasions, a hint or encouragement out of the common way, yet expressly to look for and seek his direction in such things as I have mentioned is unscriptural and ensnaring. I could fill many sheets with a detail of the inconveniences and evils which have followed such a dependence, within the course of my own observation. I have seen some presuming they were doing God's service while acting in contradiction to his express commands. I have known others, infatuated to believe a lie, declaring themselves assured, beyond the shadow of a doubt, of things which, after all, never came to pass and, when at length disappointed, Satan has improved the occasion to make them doubt of the plainest and most important truths, and to account their whole former experience a delusion. By these things weak believers have been stumbled, cavils and offences against the gospel multiplied, and the ways of truth evil spoken of.

But how, then, may the Lord's guidance be expected? After what has been premised negatively, the question may be answered in a few words. In general, he guides and directs his people by affording them, in answer to prayer, the light of his Holy Spirit, which enables them to understand and to love the scriptures. The word of God is not to be used as a lottery, nor is it designed to instruct us by

shreds and scraps, which, detached from their proper places, have no determined import, but it is to furnish us with just principles, right apprehensions, to regulate our judgments and affections, and thereby to influence and direct our conduct. They who study the scriptures, in an humble dependence upon divine teaching, are convinced of their own weakness, are taught to make a true estimate of everything around them, are gradually formed into a spirit of submission to the will of God, discover the nature and duties of their several situations and relations in life, and the snares and temptations to which they are exposed. The word of God dwells richly in them, is a preservative from error, a light to their feet, and a spring of strength and consolation. By treasuring up the doctrines, precepts, promises, examples, and exhortations of scripture in their minds, and daily comparing themselves with the rule by which they walk, they grow into a habitual frame of spiritual wisdom, and acquire a gracious taste, which enables them to judge of right and wrong with a degree of readiness and certainty, as a musical ear judges of sounds; and they are seldom mistaken, because they are influenced by the love of Christ which rules in their hearts, and a regard to the glory of God, which is the great objects they have in view.

In particular cases the Lord opens and shuts for them, breaks down walls of difficulty which obstruct their path, or hedges up their way with thorns, when they are in danger of going wrong, by the dispensations of his providence. They know that their concernments are in his hands; they are willing to follow whither and when he leads, but are afraid of going before him. Therefore they are not impatient. Because they believe, they will not make haste, but wait daily upon him in prayer; especially when they find their hearts most engaged in any purpose or pursuit, they are most jealous of being deceived by appearances, and dare not move farther or faster than they can perceive his light shining upon their paths. I express at least their desire, if not their attainment: thus they would be. And though there are seasons when faith languishes, and self too much prevails, this is their general disposition, and the Lord, whom they serve, does not disappoint their expectations; he leads them by a right way, preserves them from a thousand snares, and satisfies them that he is and will be their guide even unto death.

I am, &c.