

THE
WORKS
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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LETTER XXIX.

THOUGHTS ON ROM. VIII. 19, 20, 21.

DEAR SIR,

THE apostle evidently introduces this passage in confirmation of what he had said before, ver. 17, 18. The privileges of the children of God are not only great, but sure. Everything we see confirms our expectation of what God has promised. The whole frame of nature, in its present state of imperfection, strongly pleads for a future and better dispensation, as necessary to vindicate the wisdom, goodness, and justice of God; and this shall take place when the sons of God shall be manifested, and shall shine forth in the kingdom of their Father. It would be injurious to the honour of God to suppose that things were at first created in the state they are now in, or that they will always continue so, and therefore the creature, which was originally designed to show forth the glory of God, is represented as burdened and groaning till those impediments are removed which prevent it from fully answering its proper end.

Dr. Guyse's proposal of reading the 20th verse (the words in hope excepted) in a parenthesis, seems greatly to free the sense from embarrassment. Then the proposition in the 19th and 21st verses will be, "The earnest expectation of the creature waiteth in hope for the manifestation of the sons of God; because then the creature also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption," &c. The 20th verse expresses the creature's present state, "It is subject to vanity;" and intimates the cause, "Not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same."

By the creature some understand mankind, as the word is used Mark xvi. 15; and it is certain that, partly from imperfect tradition, and partly from a general rumour of the prophecies extant among the Jews, the heathens had some confused apprehension of a deliverer from misery; agreeably to which, or rather on account of their need of a saviour, whether they knew it or not, Christ is styled "the desire of all nations." But this does not seem to be the sense; because the creature here is said to be subject to vanity, not willingly, and is represented as groaning, travailing, and longing (ver. 22.) for deliverance. But it is so far from being the concurrent desire of all mankind, or indeed the desire of any single person, to obtain freedom from the bondage of sin, that we are naturally pleased with it, and yield a willing subjection. Besides, the period referred to is beyond the present life, and intends not a partial relief here, but a full deliverance hereafter. It seems, therefore, that creature, in these verses, and creation, in ver. 22, as they are both expressed by the same word in the Greek, are to be taken in the same sense. The whole frame of this lower world, which is now subject to vanity on account of the sin of man, is represented as longing and waiting for deliverance.

The Greek word, which we render "earnest expectation," is very emphatical; it imports a raising up or thrusting forward the head, as persons who are in suspense for the return of a messenger, or the issue of some interesting event. Compare Judges v. 28, Luke xxi. 28. It occurs but once more in the New Testament, Phil. i, 20, where the apostle is describing, in one view, the confidence of his hope and the many conflicts and oppositions which were the daily exercise of his faith.

Now it is frequent beauty in the scripture language to apply human affections to the inanimate creation, and these expressions are to be taken in a figurative sense, as denoting the importance and evidence of what is said. See Gen. iv. 11, Is. i. 2, Luke xix. 40. The “earnest expectation of the creature,” therefore, teaches us two things, the weight and burden of the evils under which the world groans, and the sure purpose of God to restore all things by Jesus Christ. There is a period approaching when all that is now rough and crooked shall be made plain and straight. The Lord has promised it, and therefore all his works are represented as expecting and waiting for it.

This shall be at “the manifestation of the sons of God.” They are now hidden, unknown, unnoticed, and misrepresented, for the most part. Their life is in many respects hidden from themselves, and their privileges altogether hidden from the world; but ere long they will be manifested, their God will openly acknowledge them, every cloud by which they are now obscured shall be removed, and they shall shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. They have now a gracious liberty; they are freed from condemnation, from the power of sin, from the law as a covenant of works, from the yoke of carnal ordinances, from the traditions and inventions of men, and from the spirit of bondage; yet they suffer much from indwelling sin, the temptations of Satan, and their situation in a wicked and ensnaring world. But they are animated with the hope of a glorious liberty, when every evil, imperfection, and abatement shall cease, when they shall be put in the full possession of a happiness answerable to the riches of divine love and the efficacy of the blood and mediation of Jesus, and then the curse shall be fully removed from the creation; the Lord shall create all things new, and again pronounce all things good. When they are thus manifested, the creature’s expectation shall be answered; it shall be restored to its honour and use. Under what circumstances, and to what particular purposes, this change will take place we know not, but a change worthy of divine wisdom, though beyond the limits of our weak apprehensions, we are warranted from scripture to expect. It is asserted in this passage, to which, perhaps, we may properly add 2 Pet. iii. 13, Rev. xxi. 1. It would be easy to indulge in vain conjectures upon this subject, but it is more safe to restrain them, and to content ourselves with what is clearly revealed. The hour is coming when all difficulties shall be explained, when the mysterious plan of divine providence shall be unfolded, vindicated, and completed; then it shall appear that the Lord Jesus Christ is the head and restorer of the creation, and how fully, in every sense, he has repaired the ruin brought into the world by sin, and destroyed the works of the devil.

In the meantime, the sons of God groan, waiting for their adoption, and the creation groans with them. At present it is subject to vanity. Its original design was to fulfil the will, and to set forth the glory of God; but, by the sin of man, it is disappointed with respect to these ends, not absolutely, for still the heavens declare his glory and the earth is full of his goodness, but, with regard to out-ward appearances, there is a great abatement in both these respects. We may instance a few particulars in which the creature is abused and oppressed, contrary to the design of its creation.

The creature was intended to show forth the glory of God; but here it has been disappointed, and has groaned, being burdened in all ages. Vain man has always been disposed to serve and worship the creature more than the Creator. The whole world formerly, except the Jews, were sunk in idolatry, paying

divine honours to the sun and moon, yea, to stocks and stones; and a great part of the earth is to this moment covered with the same darkness. When this is the case, the creature groans under vanity, being perverted directly contrary to its proper end; and there is another idolatry, if not so gross, yet in us more inexcusable, by which the generality of those who bear the name of christians are no less alienated from the knowledge and love of the true God, than the heathens themselves.

Again, the creatures, as the servants of God, are properly designed to promote the welfare of his children, 1 Cor, iii. 22, Job v. 23. This great end is indeed finally secured by the promise, that all shall work together for their good; but at present they are exposed to great sufferings; all things seem to come alike to all. This, on the Lord's part, is a wise and gracious appointment for the exercise of faith, the mortification of sin, and the advancement of sanctification; but still, in itself, it is a vanity under which the creation groans. When Jesus was crucified in person, the sun withdrew his light, rocks rent, and the earth quaked. There is a proportionable constraint upon nature when he suffers in his members. Sometimes this part of the vanity has been suspended, as in the case of Daniel and his companions; and, doubtless, the creatures would in general reverence the Heir of glory, were not the effects of sin upon them continued for wise reasons. They were subject to man, when man was subject to his Maker. At present there is an apparent inconsistency, when beasts, and storms, and seas rage against those whom the Creator is pleased to favour,

Once more, the creatures of God might be expected to engage in his behalf against his enemies; but it is subject to vanity here likewise. The earth is the Lord's, yet the chief parts and possessions of it are in the hands of those who hate him; yea, his enemies employ his creatures against his own friends. Surely, if the secret powerful restraint of his providence were taken off, it would be otherwise. How ready all the creatures are to fight in the Lord's cause, if he please to employ them, we may learn from the history of Egypt, in Exodus, from the death of Dathan and Abiram, and the destruction of Sennacherib's army. It is therefore a bondage introduced by sin, and under which they groan, that they are compelled to prolong the lives and serve the occasions of ungodly sinners.

The effect being manifest, that the creature is subject to vanity, the apostle briefly intimates the cause: "Not willingly." The creature, considered in itself, is not in fault. All things were created good in the beginning, and in themselves are good still. Not the fault, but the perversion and subjection of the creature, are here complained of. A beauty, variety, and order in the works of God are still discernible, sufficient to fill an attentive and enlightened mind with wonder, love, and praise; though it must be allowed, that sin has not only alienated our hearts, and disabled our faculties, so that we cannot rightly contemplate God and his works, but has likewise occasioned a considerable alteration in the visible state of things. One instance is expressly specified, Gen. iii. 16.

The positive cause is ascribed to "him who has subjected the same." These words may bear three different senses in agreement with the current doctrine of the scriptures. The prime author of the mischief was Satan. Full of malice and enmity against God and his creatures, he attempted to bring evil into this lower world, and was permitted to succeed; the Lord purposing to

overrule it to his own glory. But, for a season, the work of the devil has been to introduce and maintain a sad scene of vanity and misery. Our first father Adam was the direct and immediate cause of the entrance of sin and vanity into the creation. He was created upright, and all things good about him; but he listened to Satan, and sinned, and by his sin brought death into the world, and all our woe; for we were concerned in his transgression, as he was our head, both in nature and law. But we may refer the hint to God; and this seems best to suit the apostle's design here. God, the righteous judge, subjected the creature to vanity, as the just consequence and desert of man's disobedience. But he has subjected it in hope; with a reserve in favour of his own people, by which, though they are liable to trouble, they are secured from the penal desert of sin, and the vanity of the creature is, by his wisdom, overruled to wise and gracious purposes. The earth, and all in it, was made for the sake of man; for his sin it was first cursed, and afterwards destroyed by water; and sin at last shall set it on fire. But God, who is rich in mercy, appointed a people to himself out of the fallen race. For their sakes, and as a theatre whereon to display the wonders of his providence and grace, it was renewed after the flood, and still continues, but not in its original state; there are marks of the evil of sin, and of God's displeasure against it, wherever we turn our eyes. This truth is witnessed to by everything without us, and within us. But there shall be a deliverance to those who fear him; and by his word and Spirit, he teaches them to receive instruction and benefit even from this root of bitterness. Even now they are the sons of God; but it doth not yet appear what they will be when he shall appear, and be admired in all them that believe. Then they shall be manifested, and then the creature also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption.

How blind, then, are they who expect happiness from the creature, which is itself subject to vanity, and who are meanly content with the present state of things? It is because they are estranged from God, have no sense of his excellency, no regard for his glory, no knowledge of their own proper good. They are farther removed from the desires they ought to have, in their present circumstances, than the brute creation, or the very ground they walk on; for all things but man have an instinct, or natural principle to answer the end for which they were appointed. Fire and hail, wind and storm, fulfil the word of God, though we poor mortals dare to disobey it. But if the secret voice of the whole creation desires the consummation of all things, surely they who have the light of God's word and Spirit will look forward, and long for that glorious day. Amen, even so, come, Lord Jesus!

I am, &c.