

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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SERMON IV.

THE NATURE OF SPIRITUAL REVELATION, AND WHO ARE FAVOURED WITH IT.

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.

WE proceed now to the more pleasing part of our subject. The great things of the gospel, though hid, are not lost: not hid as in the bottom of the sea; but he who hides them from the wise and prudent, is ready and willing to make them known to every sincere inquirer. This discovery, on the Lord's part, is a revelation, and the character of those who obtain it is expressed by the word *babes*. Of the five particulars I proposed to consider from the text, these two yet remain to be spoken to.

IV. The saving knowledge of divine truth is a revelation. Our Lord uses a parallel expression, when he commends Peter's confession of his faith, "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed this unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven," Matth. xvi. 17. Peter had Moses and the prophets, so had the scribes and the Pharisees; and after their manner they were diligent in reading and searching them. But that he could acknowledge Jesus to be the Messiah, when they rejected him, was because the Father had revealed this truth to him, and given him a clearer knowledge of it than he could have received from the written word alone. But it may be proper to inquire into the meaning of this term. What are we here to understand by revelation?

Sometimes revelation is used in an extraordinary sense, as when of old the Lord made known to his servants, the prophets, those doctrines and events, which till then were neither heard nor thought of. Of this we are not now to speak, but of that which is common to all believers, and necessary to salvation.

Now this revelation supposes the things to be revealed were real and certain before, but unknown, and not to be found out any other way.

Revelation is not the creation or invention of something new, but the manifestation of what was till then unknown. The great things of eternity, the glorious truths of the gospel, are real and certain in themselves already, and do not begin to be when we begin to be acquainted with them: yet till God is pleased to reveal them to the heart, we have no more spiritual and effective knowledge of them than if they were not. Ignorance of things very near to us, and in which we are nearly concerned, may be from two causes:

1. From a want of light. Nothing can be perceived in the dark. If you are in a dark room, though it is richly adorned and furnished, all is lost to you. If

you stand in a dark night upon the top of a hill that commands a fine prospect, still you are able to see no more than if you were in a valley. Though you were in a dangerous place, with pitfalls and precipices, and thieves and murderers all around you, still you might imagine yourself in safety, if you had no light with you.

2. It may be from some hindrance or obstruction between you and the object. Thus your dearest friend, or greatest enemy, might be within a few yards of you, and you know nothing of it, if there was a wall between you.

These comparisons may in some measure represent our case by nature. God is near; “in him we live, move, and have our being.” Eternity is near; we stand upon the brink of it. Death is near, advancing towards us with hasty strides. The truths of God’s word are most certain in themselves, and of the utmost consequence to us. But we perceive none of these things; we are not affected by them, because our understandings are dark, and because thick walls of ignorance, prejudice, and unbelief, stand before the eyes of the mind, and keep them from our view. Even those notions of truth which we sometimes pick up by hearing and reading, are but like windows in a dark room; they are suited to afford an entrance to the light when it comes, but can give no light of themselves.

I think, therefore, we may conclude, that God’s revealing these things to us only signifies his effecting such a change in us by his Holy Spirit, as disposes and enables us to behold them. He sends a divine light into the soul; and things begin to appear so plain, we wonder at our former stupidity, that we could not perceive them before. By the power of his Spirit, he breaks down the walls which prevented and confined our views; and a new unthought-of prospect suddenly appears before us. Then the soul sees its danger: “I thought myself secure; but I find I am in the midst of enemies. Guilt pursues me behind; fear, and the snare, and the pit, are before me; which way shall I turn?” Then it perceives its mistake: “While my views were confined, I thought there was nothing but the span of life to take care of; but now I see a boundless eternity beyond it.” It obtains a glimpse likewise of the glories of the better world, of the beauties of holiness, of the excellency of Jesus, This light is at first faint and imperfect, but grows stronger by the use of appointed means; and as it is increased, every thing appears with a stronger evidence.

We may more particularly illustrate this work of the Holy Spirit, as it influences those leading faculties of the soul, the understanding, affections, and will. By nature, the will is perverse and rebellious, and the affections alienated from God: the primary cause of these disorders lies in the darkness of the understanding. Here, then, the change, begins. The Spirit of God enlightens the understanding, by which the sinner perceives things to be as they

are represented in the word of God; that he is a transgressor against the divine law, and on this account obnoxious to wrath; that he is not only guilty, but depraved and unclean, and utterly unable either to repair past evil, or to amend his own heart and life. He sees that the great God might justly refuse him mercy; and that he has no plea to offer in arrest of judgment. This discovery would sink him into despair, if it went no farther; but, by the same light which discovers him to himself, he begins to see a suitableness, wisdom, and glory, in the method of salvation revealed in the gospel. He reads and hears concerning the person, sufferings, and offices of Christ, in a very different manner from what he did before: and as, by attending to the word and ministry, his apprehensions of Jesus and his understanding become more clear and distinct, a spiritual hope takes place and increases in his soul; and the sure effects of this is, he feels his love drawn forth to him, who so loved him as to die for his sins. Beholding, by faith, the Lord Jesus Christ, as bleeding and dying upon the cross; and knowing for whom, and on what account, he suffered, he learns to hate, with a bitter hatred, those sins which nailed him there. The amazing love of Christ constrains him to account all things which he formerly valued, as dross and dung, for the excellency of the knowledge of his Saviour. Nor does his faith stop here; he views him who once suffered and died, rising triumphant from the tomb, and ascending into heaven in the character of the representative, friend, and forerunner of his people. Having such a High-Priest, he is encouraged to draw near to God, to claim an interest in the promises, respecting the life that now is, and that which is to come. Thus possessing, in the beginnings of grace, an earnest of the glory that shall be revealed, a real, universal, abiding change necessarily takes place in the affections. Now old things are passed away, and all things become new: the soul no longer cleaves willingly to the dust, or can be satisfied with earthly things, but thirsts for communion with God, and an increase of holiness. Sin is no longer consented to, or delighted in, but is opposed and watched against; and every unallowed deviation from the will of God excites the sincerest grief and humiliation, and leads to renewed application to the blood and grace of Jesus for pardon and strength. Thus the will likewise is brought into an unreserved subjection and surrender to the power of Christ, and acts as freely in his service as it once did against him. For that what is termed *the freedom of the human will* should consist in a suspended indifference between good and evil, is a refinement, which, however admired and applauded by many, is equally contrary both to sound reasoning and to universal experience. The will, in all persons and cases, is determined by the present dictates of the understanding, and the bent of the affections.

By ascribing so much to the Spirit of God, I do not mean, as you may perceive by what I have just now said, to exclude his holy word, or preached

gospel. All these truths and prospects are already contained in the word of God; but without the light of the Spirit they are not discerned. They are propounded to you in the public ministry. We testify again and again the things which we have seen and heard of the word of life: and when we are in some measure affected with their evidence, we are ready to wonder how any of you can possibly avoid perceiving them; till we remember how it was with ourselves, and then we know, by our own experience, that we must preach, and you hear in vain, unless the Lord is pleased to open your hearts. But observe,

1. The Spirit of God teaches and enlightens by his word as the instrument. There is no revelation from him, but what is (as to our perception of it) derived from the scriptures. There may be supposed illuminations, and strong impressions upon the mind, in which the word of God has no place or concern; but this alone is sufficient to discountenance them, and to prove that they are not from the Holy Spirit. For,

2. The scriptures are the appointed rule and test, by which all our searches and discoveries, all our acquisitions in religious knowledge, must be tried. If they are indeed from God, they will stand this trial, and answer to the word as face answers to face in a glass, but not otherwise. "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them," Isa. viii. 20. If those who despise all claims to the influence of the Spirit of God, as enthusiasm, had not been frequently informed, that we expect, we acknowledge, no internal revelation, but by the medium of the word of God, and agreeable to it, they would be less inexcusable in repeating the charges of folly and infatuation, which they ignorantly fix upon the work of the Spirit, and all who profess a dependence on it. To those who are indeed candid and sincere inquirers after truth, what has been said upon this part of our subject, will, I hope, suggest the propriety of two directions. From hence learn,

1st, To set a high value upon the word of God. All that is necessary to make you wise to salvation is there, and there only. In this precious book you may find a direction for every doubt, a solution of every difficulty, a promise suited to every circumstance you can be in. There you may be informed of your disease by sin, and the remedy provided by grace. You may be instructed to know yourselves, to know God and Jesus Christ, in the knowledge of whom standeth eternal life. The wonders of redeeming love, the glories of the Redeemer's person, the happiness of the redeemed people, the power of faith, and the beauty of holiness, are here represented to the life. Nothing is wanting to make life useful and comfortable, death safe and desirable, and to bring down something of heaven upon earth. But this true wisdom can be found nowhere else. If you wander from the scriptures, in pursuit either of

present peace, or future hope, your search will end in disappointment. This is the fountain of living waters: if you forsake it, and give the preference to broken cisterns of your own devising, they will fail you when you most need them. Rejoice, therefore, that such a treasure is put into your hand: but rejoice with trembling. Remember this is not all you want: unless God likewise gives you a heart to use it aright, your privilege will only aggravate your guilt and misery. Therefore remember,

2dly, The necessity of prayer. For though the things of nearest consequence to you are in the Bible, and you should read it over and over, till you commit the whole book to your memory; yet you will not understand, or discern the truth as it is in Jesus, unless the Lord the Spirit shows it to you. The dispensation of the truth is in his hand; and without him all the fancied advantages of superior capacity, learning, criticism, and books, will prove as useless as spectacles to the blind. The great encouragement is, that this infallible Spirit, so necessary to guide us into the way of peace, is promised to all who sincerely ask it. This Spirit Jesus is exalted to bestow; and he has said, "Whosoever cometh to me, I will in no wise cast him out." Therefore water your reading with frequent prayer. We proceed to,

V. The characters of those persons who succeed in their inquiries, and have the things of God savingly revealed to them; they are called *babes*.

1. They are for the most part babes in the world's esteem. They are despised by the wise and prudent for their weak capacities, small attainments, and their seeming insignificance in common life. But the Lord does not overlook any on these accounts. He is no respecter of persons. In the blessings of his common providence, those which are more immediately from his own hand, such as air and light, health and strength, the faculties of sight and hearing, &c. he bestows as freely, and in as great perfection, to the poor as to the rich, to the ignorant as to the learned. And thus it is with respect to his grace. Our incapacity is founded in our nature, and is common to all, and not in any particular circumstances. He is as ready to save the mean as the noble. Many of the great and wise are offended at this. As they engross the earth, they would willingly engross heaven also to themselves. But the Lord has appointed otherwise; and it has been one reproach constantly attending the gospel, that few but the common people (Mark xii. 37. John vii. 48, 49.) have thought it worth their notice,

2. They are babes in their own esteem. Not that some are more humble than others by nature, and therefore the Lord gives them a preference on that account, for by nature we are all alike, equally destitute of the smallest good; but the expression teaches us, that those to whom the Lord is pleased to reveal these things, he first empties and humbles, strips them of all ground of boasting, and brings them to a dependence on himself. The true believer is

frequently compared to a little child; and it is easy to trace an instructive resemblance.

1st, A child or babe has little knowledge, and its capacity and powers are as yet very feeble. All whose understandings have been spiritually enlightened will acknowledge themselves children in this respect. The little they know convinces them of their ignorance. They are convinced that their views of things are faint, partial, confused; that their judgments are weak; that if the Lord prevents it not, they are very liable to be imposed on by the subtlety of Satan, and the treachery of their own hearts. They feel that they have not in themselves sufficiency to think a good thought.

2dly, A child is teachable. Conscious of their own ignorance, they listen to all about them, and think every one is qualified to teach them something. Among men none are truly teachable, but those who know they need to be taught. The natural man, if possessed of any advantages, thinks every one needs his help. The humble Christian gives this proof, that the confession he is ready to make of his ignorance is genuine, and from his heart, that he is desirous to learn from all. He is swift to hear, slow to speak, and open to conviction. Though he will not assent to every thing he hears without proof or examination, yet he is disposed to receive instruction, and thankful to those by whom he is profited. He is fearful of being mistaken, of giving way to prejudices, and therefore gladly improves every means of information.

3dly, A child is simple and dependent. He does not reason, but implicitly receives what he is told by his parents, or those whom he thinks wiser than himself. Such a resignation, indeed, the believer dares not make of his understanding to any men, however highly he may esteem them in the main; for he has learned from the word of God, not to put his trust in man: but this is the desire of the renewed heart, with respect to the teaching of God's word and Spirit. He allows no reasoning or questioning here; nor will he say with Nicodemus, "How can these things be?" It is enough for him that God has said it, and is able to make it good. This is a happy temper. In this way innumerable difficulties that arise from appearances and sophisms are avoided; and the mind, by faith, steers in safety across the immense ocean of conjectures and opinions, which disputants and reasoners, essaying to do, are sunk and overpowered. It is true, there are various degrees of this simplicity; and in those who possess it in a larger measure, there is a remaining principle of pride and unbelief, which costs them much prayer and many conflicts to subdue. But this, in some degree, is essential to the character of those who are taught of God; they desire and endeavour to submit wholly to his guidance and will in all things.

Here, then, is a proper topic for self-examination. Let each one ask his heart, Have I this simple, child-like disposition?

If you have, if it is the desire of your soul to be taught of God, if his word is your rule, if you depend on his Spirit to teach you all things, and to lead you as it were by the hand, sensible that, unless you are thus led and guided, you shall certainly go astray; be thankful for this, accept it as a token for good. You were not always so: there was a time when you were wise in your own eyes, and prudent in your own sight. You have good warrant to hope that the Lord, who has already taught you to depend on himself, will show you all that is necessary for you to know.

But if this is not the case, if you lean to your own understanding, what wonder is it that you are still walking in darkness and uncertainty? Will you say, I have read the Bible diligently; I have taken no small pains to examine things, to see which of the many divisions that obtain among Christians is possessed of the truth; but I am still at a loss: surely, if the tenets some plead for had been in the scriptures, I should have found them there? I answer, without detracting from your sagacity or your sincerity, your case is easily accounted for from the verse which we are upon, if your inquiries are not conducted in a humble dependence upon the Spirit of God. Too many instances we could produce of men, who having laboured for years in what seems one of the most laudable undertakings, the explaining the scriptures for the use of others, have at last been in a remarkable degree unsettled themselves; and the only visible fruits their reading and industry have afforded, have been error, invective, and dissatisfaction; so that their labours have been an exemplification of the former part of our text, a proof in point how entirely the things of God are often hid from the wise and prudent.

You that are seeking the Lord, and are little in your own eyes, rejoice that the dispensation of grace is in his hands. If men had the disposal of it, you might perhaps have been overlooked. We should have been ready to have accepted the fair-spoken young man who accosted our Lord with so much outward respect, and had so much to say in his own behalf (Mark x. 20); and probably we should have left the thief upon the cross to perish like a wretch as he deserved. "But the Lord seeth not as man seeth," 1 Sam. xvi. 7. "His ways are higher than our ways, and his thoughts than our thoughts," Isa. lv. 7, 9. Therefore there is encouragement for the meanest and the vilest. He has excluded none but those who exclude themselves. "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation! Let the wicked forsake his ways, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the Lord, for he will have mercy upon him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.