

THE
WORKS
OF
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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.

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SERMON I.

THE CONSOLATION.

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received at the Lord's hand double for all her sins.—ISAIAH, xl. 1, 2.

THE particulars of the great mystery of godliness, as enumerated by the apostle Paul, constitute the grand and inexhaustible theme of the gospel ministry: "God manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory," 1 Tim. iii. 16. It is my wish and purpose to know nothing among you but this subject; to preach nothing to you but what has a real connection with the doctrine of Jesus Christ, and him crucified, and with the causes and effects of his obedience unto death, even the death of the cross. But a regard to the satisfaction and advantage of my stated hearers, has often made me desirous of adopting some plan, which might lead me to exhibit the principal outlines of the Saviour's character and mediation in a regular series of discourses, so as to form, if not a picture, at least a slight sketch, of those features of his glory and of his grace which endear him to the hearts of his people. Such a plan has lately, and rather unexpectedly, occurred to me. Conversation in almost every company, for some time past, has much turned upon the commemoration of Handel; the grand musical entertainments, and particularly his Oratorio of the Messiah, which have been repeatedly performed on that occasion in Westminster Abbey. If it could be reasonably hoped, that the performers and the company assembled to hear the music, or the greater part, or even a considerable part of them, were capable of entering into the spirit of the subject, I will readily allow that the Messiah, executed in so masterly a manner, by persons whose hearts, as well as their voices and instruments, were tuned to the Redeemer's praise; accompanied with the grateful emotions of an audience duly affected with a sense of their obligations to his love; might afford one of the highest and noblest gratifications of which we are capable in the present life. But they who love the Redeemer, and therefore delight to join in his praise, if they did not find it convenient, or think it expedient, to hear the Messiah at Westminster, may comfort themselves with the thought, that, in a little time, they shall be still more abundantly gratified. Ere long death shall rend the vail which hides eternal things from their view, and introduce them to that unceasing song and universal chorus, which are even now performing before the throne of God and the Lamb. Till then, I apprehend, that

true Christians, without the assistance of either vocal or instrumental music, may find greater pleasure in a humble contemplation on the words of the Messiah, than they can derive from the utmost efforts of musical genius. This, therefore, is the plan I spoke of. I mean to lead your meditations to the language of the Oratorio, and to consider in their order (if the Lord, on whom our breath depends, shall be pleased to afford life, ability, and opportunity) the several sublime and interesting passages of scripture which are the basis of that admired composition.

If he shall condescend to smile upon the attempt, pleasure and profit will go hand in hand. There is no harmony to a heaven-born soul like that which is the result of the combination and coincidence of all the divine attributes and perfections, manifested in the work of redemption; mercy and truth meeting together, inflexible righteousness corresponding with the peace of offenders, God glorious, and sinners saved. There is no melody upon earth to be compared with the voice of the blood of Jesus, speaking peace to a guilty conscience, or with the voice of the Holy Spirit, applying the promises to the heart, and sweetly inspiring a temper of confidence and adoption. These are joys which the world can neither give nor take away, which never pall upon the mind by continuance or repetition; the sense of them is always new, the recollection of them is always pleasant. Nor do they only satisfy, but sanctify the soul. They strengthen faith, animate hope, add fervency to love, and both dispose and enable the Christian to run in all the paths of holy obedience with an enlarged heart.

The Messiah of Handel consists of three parts. The first contains prophecies of his advent, and the happy consequences, together with the angel's message to the shepherds, informing them of his birth, as related by St. Luke. The second part describes his passion, death, resurrection, and ascension; his taking possession of his kingdom of glory, the commencement of his kingdom of grace upon earth, and the certain disappointment and ruin of all who persist in opposition to his will. The third part expresses the blessed fruits and consummation of his undertaking, in the deliverance of his people from sin, sorrow, and death, and in making them finally victorious over all their enemies. The triumphant song of the redeemed, to the praise of the Lamb, who bought them with his own blood, closes the whole. The arrangement or series of these passages is so judiciously disposed, so well connected, and so fully comprehends all the principal truths of the gospel, that I shall not attempt either to alter or to enlarge it. The exordium or introduction, which I have read to you from the prophecy of Isaiah, is very happily chosen.

If, as some eminent commentators suppose, the prophet had any reference, in this passage, to the return of Israel from Babylon into their own

land, his principal object was undoubtedly of much greater importance. Indeed, their deliverance from captivity, and their state afterwards as a nation, do not appear to correspond with the magnificent images employed in the following verses; for though they rebuilt their city and temple, they met with many insults and much opposition, and continued to be a tributary and dependent people. I shall therefore waive the consideration of this sense.

The eye of the prophet's mind seems to be chiefly fixed upon one august personage, who was approaching to enlighten and bless a miserable world; and before he describes the circumstances of his appearance, he is directed to comfort the mourners in Zion, with an assurance, that this great event would fully compensate them for all their sorrows. The state of Jerusalem, the representative name of the people of God, was very low in Isaiah's time. The people, who, in the days of Solomon, were attached to the service of God, honoured with signal tokens of his presence and favour, and raised to the highest pitch of temporal prosperity, were now degenerated; the gold was become dim, and the fine gold changed. Iniquity abounded, judgments were impending, yet insensibility and security prevailed, and the words of many were stout against the Lord. But there were a few who feared the Lord, whose eyes affected their hearts, and who mourned for the evils which they could not prevent. These, and these only, were, in strictness of speech, the people of the Lord, and to these the message of comfort is addressed. Speak to Jerusalem comfortably, speak *to her heart* (as the Hebrew word is), to her very case, and tell her that there is a balm for all her wounds, a cordial for all her griefs, in this one consideration, Messiah is at hand. In the prophetic style, things future are described as present, and that which the mouth of the Lord hath spoken of as sure to take place, is considered as already done. Thus the prophet, "rapt into future times," contemplates the manifestation of Messiah, the accomplishment of his great undertaking, and all the happy consequences of his obedience unto death for men, as though he stood upon the spot, and with John, the harbinger of our Lord (whose appearance he immediately describes), was pointing with his finger to the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world.

This comfortable message consists of two parts. First, the removal of evil,—“Her warfare is accomplished, her iniquity is pardoned.” Secondly, a promise of good, more than equivalent to all her afflictions,—“She hath received at the Lord's hand double for all her sins.”

I. Two ideas are included in the original term, translated “warfare:”

1. A state of service, connected with hardship, like that of the military life, Numb, i. 3.

2. An appointed time, as it is rendered in Job, vii. 1, and xiv. 14.

These ideas equally apply to the Mosaic dispensation. The spirit of that institution was comparatively a spirit of bondage, distance, and fear; and the state of the church, while under the law, is resembled by the apostle to that of a minor, who, though he be an heir, is under tutors and governors, and differeth but little from a servant, until the time appointed of the Father, Gal. iv. 1—4. The ceremonial law, with respect to its inefficacy, is styled weak, and with respect to the long train of its multiplied, expensive, difficult, and repeated appointments, a yoke and burden. But it was only for a prescribed time. The gospel was designed to supersede it, and to introduce a state of life, power, liberty, and confidence. The blackness and darkness, the fire and tempest, and other circumstances of terror attendant on the promulgation of the law at Mount Sinai (Heb. xii. 18–22.), which not only struck the people with dismay, but caused even Moses himself to say, “I exceedingly fear and quake,” were expressive of its design; which was not to lead the people of Israel to expect peace and hope from their best obedience to that covenant, but rather to convince them of the necessity of a better covenant, established upon better promises, and to direct their hopes to Messiah, who was prefigured by all their sacrifices, and who, in the fulness of time, was to make a complete atonement for sin, by the sacrifice of himself. Then their legal figurative constitution would cease, the shadows give place to the substance, and the true worshippers of God would be instructed, enabled, and encouraged, to worship him in spirit and in truth; no more as servants, but in the temper of adoption, as the children of God, by faith in the Son of his love.

There is a considerable analogy to this difference between the law and the gospel, as contradistinguished from each other, in the previous distress of a sinner, when he is made sensible of his guilt and danger as a transgressor of the law of God, and the subsequent peace which he obtains by believing the gospel. The good seed of the word of grace can only take root and flourish in a soil duly prepared. And this preparation of the heart (Prov. xvi. 1), without which, all that is read or heard concerning Messiah produces no permanent good effect, is wholly from the Lord. The first good work of the Holy Spirit upon the heart of fallen man, is to convince of sin, John xvi. 9. He gives some due impressions of the majesty and holiness of the God with whom we have to do, of our dependence upon him, of our obligations to him as our Creator, Lawgiver, and Benefactor; then we begin to form our estimate of duty, of sin, and its desert, not from the prevalent maxims and judgment of mankind around us, but from the unerring standard of scripture. Thence new and painful apprehensions arise—the lofty looks of man are humbled, his haughtiness is brought low, his mouth stopped, or only opened to confess his guilt and vileness, and to cry for

mercy. He now feels himself under the law; it condemns him, and he cannot reply; it commands him, and he cannot obey. He has neither righteousness nor strength, and must sink into despair, were it not that he is now qualified to hearken to the gospel with other ears, and to read the scriptures with other eyes (if I may so speak), than he once did. He now knows he is sick, and therefore knows his need of a physician. This state of anxiety, conflict, and fear, which keeps comfort from his heart, and perhaps slumber from his eyes, is often of long continuance. There is no common standard whereby to determine either the degree or the duration. Both differ in different persons; and as the body and the mind have a strong and reciprocal influence upon each other, it is probable the difference observable in such cases may in part depend upon constitutional causes. However, the time is a prescribed time, and though not subject to any rules or reasonings of ours, is limited and regulated by the wisdom of God. He wounds and he heals, in his own appointed moment. None that continue waiting upon him, and seeking salvation, in the means which he has directed, shall be finally disappointed. Sooner or later he gives them, according to his promise, beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness, Isa. lxi. 3. This warfare is accomplished, when they rightly understand and cordially believe the following clause.

Her iniquity is pardoned.—Though the sacrifices under the law had an immediate and direct effect to restore the offender, for whom they were offered, to the privileges pertaining to the people of Israel, considered as a nation or commonwealth, they could not, of themselves, cleanse the conscience from guilt. It is a dictate of right reason, no less than of revelation, that it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sin, Heb. x. 4. For this purpose, the blood of Christ had a retrospective efficacy, and was the only ground of consolation for a convinced sinner from the beginning of the world. He was proposed to our first parents as the seed of the woman, who should bruise the serpent's head, Gen. iii. 15. In this seed Abraham believed, and was justified, and all of every age who were justified, were partakers of Abraham's faith. Therefore the apostle teaches us, that when God set him forth as a propitiation, through faith in his blood, he declared his righteousness in the remission of sins that were past, Rom. iii. 25. For though we may suppose God would have declared his mercy in forgiving sin upon any terms, no consideration but the death of his Son could have exhibited his righteousness; that is, his holiness, justice, and truth, in the pardon of sin. True penitents and believers were pardoned and saved under the law, but not by the law. Their faith looked through all the legal institutions to him who was represented and typified by them. But the types which revealed him, in a sense concealed him likewise; so that,

though Abraham saw his day, and rejoiced, and a succession of the servants of God foresaw his glory and his sufferings, and spake of him; yet, in general, the church of the Old Testament rather desired and longed for, than actually possessed, that fulness of light and knowledge concerning the person, offices, love, and victory of Messiah, which is the privilege of those who enjoy and believe the gospel, Heb. xi. 39, 40. Yet great discoveries of these things were vouchsafed to some of the prophets, particularly to Isaiah, who, on account of the clearness of his views of the Redeemer and his kingdom, has been sometimes styled the fifth evangelist. The most evangelical part of his prophecy, or at least that part in which he prosecutes the subject with the least interruption, begins with this chapter and with this verse. And he proposes it for the comfort of the mourners in Zion in his day. We know that the Son of God, of whom Moses and the prophets spake, is actually come (1 John v. 20); that the atonement for sin is made, the ransom for sinners paid and accepted. Now the shadows are past, the vail removed, the night is ended, the dawn, the day, is arrived, yea the Sun of righteousness is arisen, with healing in his wings, Mal. iv. 2. God is reconciled in his Son, and the ministers of the gospel are now authorised to preach comfort to all who mourn under a sense of sin; to tell them, all manner of sin is forgiven, for the Redeemer's sake, and that the iniquity of those who believe in him is freely and abundantly pardoned.

II. Though the last clause of the verse does not belong to the passage, as selected for the Oratorio, it is so closely corrected with the subject, that I am not willing to omit it. "She has received at the Lord's hand double for all her sin." The meaning here cannot be, that her afflictions had already been more and greater, than her sins had deserved. The just desert of sin cannot be received in the present life, for the wages of sin is death and the curse of the law, or, in the apostle's words, everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his power, 2 Thess, i. 9. Therefore a living man can have no reason to complain under the heaviest sufferings. If we acknowledge ourselves to be sinners, we have likewise cause to acknowledge, that he hath not dealt with us according to our iniquities. Nor can the words be so applied to Messiah, as to intimate, that even his sufferings were more than necessary, or greater than the exigence of the case required. The efficacy of his atonement is indeed greater than the actual application, and sufficient to save the whole race of mankind if they truly believed in the Son of God. We read, that he groaned and bled upon the cross, till he could say, It is finished, but no longer. It becomes us to refer to infinite wisdom the reasons why his sufferings were prolonged for such a precise time; but I think we may take it for granted, that they did not endure an hour or a minute longer than was strictly necessary. The expression seems

to be elliptical, and I apprehend the true sense is, that Jerusalem should receive blessings, double, much greater than all the afflictions which sin had brought upon her; and in general to us, to every believing sinner, that the blessings of the gospel are an unspeakably great compensation, and over-balance, for all afflictions of every kind with which we have been, or can be exercised. Afflictions are the fruit of sin, and because our sins have been many, our afflictions may be many. "But where sin has abounded, grace has much more abounded," Rom. v. 20.

Before our Lord healed the paralytic man who was brought to him, he said, "Be of good cheer, thy sins are forgiven thee," Mark ii. 5. His outward malady rendered him an object of compassion to those who brought him: but he appears to have been sensible of an inward malady, which only Jesus could discern, or pity, or relieve. I doubt not but his conscience was burdened with guilt. An assurance therefore that his sins were forgiven, was sufficient to make him be of good cheer, whether his palsy were removed or not. To this purpose the psalmist speaks absolutely and without exception. "Blessed is the man, (however circumstanced), whose transgression is forgiven, whose iniquity is covered," Psal. xxxii. 1. Though he be poor, afflicted, diseased, neglected or despised, if the Lord imputeth not his iniquity to him, he is a blessed man. There is no situation in human life so deplorable, but a sense of the pardoning love of God can support and comfort the sufferer under it, compose his spirit, yea, make him exceedingly joyful in all his tribulations. For he who feels the power of the blood of Jesus cleansing his conscience from guilt, and giving him access by faith to the throne of grace, with liberty to say, Abba, Father; he knows that all his trials are under the direction of wisdom and love, are all working together for his good, and that the heaviest of them are light, and the longest momentary, in comparison of that far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory which is reserved for him in a better world, 2 Cor. iv. 16, 17. Even at present in the midst of his sufferings, having communion with God, and a gracious submission to his will, he possesses a peace that passeth understanding, and which the world can neither give nor take away.

I shall close this preliminary discourse with a few observations by way of improvement.

1. How justly may we adopt the prophet's words, "Who is a God like unto thee?" Micah, vii. 18. Behold and admire his goodness! Infinitely happy and glorious in himself, he has provided for the comfort of those who were rebels against his government, and transgressors of his holy law. What was degenerate Israel, and what are we, that he should thus prevent us with his mercy, remember us in our low estate, and redeem us from misery, in such a way, and at such a price! Salvation is wholly of grace (Ephes. ii. 5); not

only undeserved, but undesired by us, till he is pleased to awaken us to a sense of our need of it. And then we find everything prepared that our wants require, or our wishes can conceive; yea, that he has done exceedingly beyond what we could either ask or think. Salvation is wholly of the Lord (Psal. iii. 8), and bears those signatures of infinite wisdom, power, and goodness, which distinguish all his works from the puny imitations of men. It is every way worthy of himself; a great, a free, a full, a sure salvation. It is great,—whether we consider the objects, miserable and hell-deserving sinners; the end, the restoration of such alienated creatures to his image and favour, to immortal life and happiness; or the means, the incarnation, humiliation, sufferings and death of his beloved Son. It is free,—without exception of persons or cases, without any conditions or qualifications, but such as he himself performs in them, and bestows upon them. It is full,—including every desirable blessing; pardon, peace, adoption, protection and guidance through this world, and in the world to come eternal life and happiness, in the unclouded, uninterrupted enjoyment of the favour and love of God, with the perfect and perpetual exclusion of every evil.

2. When the Lord God, who knows the human heart, would speak comfort to it, he proposes one object, and only one, as the necessary and all-sufficient source of consolation. This is Messiah. Jesus in his person and offices, known and received by faith, affords a balm for every wound, a cordial for every care. If we admit that they who live in the spirit of the world, can make a poor shift to amuse themselves, and be tolerably satisfied in a state of prosperity, while everything goes on according to their wish; while we make this concession (which however is more than we need allow them, for we know that no state of life is free from anxiety, disappointment, weariness, and disgust), yet we must consider them as objects of compassion. It is a proof of the weakness and disorder of their minds, that they are capable of being satisfied with such trifles. Thus if a lunatic conceives his cell to be a palace, that his chains are ornaments of gold, if he calls a wreath of his straw a crown, puts it on his head, and affects the language of majesty—we do not suppose the poor creature to be happy, because he tells us that he is so; but we rather consider his complacency in his situation, as an effect and proof of his malady. We pity him, and, if we were able, would gladly restore him to his senses, though we know a cure would immediately put an end to his pleasing delusions. But, I say, supposing or admitting the world could make its votaries happy in a state of prosperity, it will, it must, leave them without resource in the day of trouble. And they are to be pitied indeed, who, when their gourds are withered, when the desire of their eyes is taken from them with a stroke, or the evil which they most feared touches them, or when death looks them closely in

the face, have no acquaintance with God, no access to the throne of grace, but being without Christ, are without a solid hope of good hereafter, though they are forced to feel the vanity and inconstancy of everything here. But they who know Messiah, who believe in him, and partake of his spirit, cannot be comfortless. They recollect what he suffered for them, they know that every circumstance and event of life is under his direction, and designed to work for their good: that though they sow in tears, they shall soon reap in joy: and therefore they possess their souls in patience, and are cheerful, yea comfortable, under those trying dispensations of providence, which when they affect the lovers of pleasure, too often either excite in them a spirit of presumptuous murmuring against the will of God; or sink them into despondency, and all the melancholy train of evils attendant on those who languish and pine away under that depression of spirits, emphatically styled a broken heart.

3. To be capable of the comfort my text proposes, the mind must be in a suitable disposition. A free pardon is a comfort to a malefactor, but it implies guilt; and therefore they who have no apprehension that they have broken the laws, would be rather offended than comforted, by an offer of pardon, This is one principal cause of that neglect, yea contempt, which the gospel of the grace of God meets with from the world. If we could suppose that a company of people who were all trembling under an apprehension of his displeasure, constrained to confess the justice of the sentence, but not as yet informed of any way to escape, were to hear this message for the first time, and to be fully assured of its truth and authority, they would receive it as life from the dead. But it is to be feared, that for want of knowing themselves, and their real state in the sight of him with whom they have to do, many persons, who have received pleasure from the music of the Messiah, have neither found, nor expected, nor desired to find, any comfort from the words.