

THE
WORKS
OF
THE REV . JOHN NEWTON

LATE RECTOR OF THE UNITED PARISHES OF
ST. MARY WOOLNOTH AND ST. MARY WOOLCHURCH-HAW,
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.

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MESSIAH
OR
FIFTY EXPOSITORY DISCOURSES
ON THE SERIES OF
SCRIPTURAL PASSAGES
WHICH FORM THE SUBJECT OF HANDEL'S CELEBRATED
ORATORIO
OF THAT NAME,
PREACHED IN THE YEARS 1784 AND 1785,
IN THE
PARISH CHURCH OF ST. MARY WOOLNOTH,
LOMBARD STREET,
LONDON.

———Ah!
Tantamne rem, tam negligenter, agere!—TER.

Oh, that they were wise, that they understood this!—DEUT. xxxii. 29.

TO THE
PARISHIONERS OF ST. MARY WOOLNOTH,
AND
ST. MARY WOOLCHURCH HAW,
LONDON,
THESE SERMONS
ON THE
MESSIAH
ARE AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED BY THE
AUTHOR,
TO REMAIN AS A TESTIMONY OF HIS RESPECT
FOR THEIR PERSONS,
AND HIS SOLICITUDE FOR THEIR WELFARE,
WHEN HIS PRESENT RELATION
TO THEM, AS THEIR MINISTER,
SHALL BE DISSOLVED.

SERMON X.

THE ANGEL'S MESSAGE AND SONG.

There were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel of the Lord said unto them, Fear not; for, behold, I bring unto you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling-clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, good will towards men. LUKE, ii. 8–14.

THE gratification of the great, the wealthy, and the gay was chiefly consulted in the late exhibitions in Westminster Abbey. But notwithstanding the expense of the preparations, and the splendid appearance of the auditory, I may take it for granted that the shepherds who were honoured with the first information of the birth of Messiah, enjoyed, at free cost, a much more sublime and delightful entertainment. How poor and trivial is the most studied magnificence and brilliancy of an earthly court compared with that effulgence of glory which surrounded the shepherds! The performers of this Oratorio, if I may be allowed the expression, were a multitude of the heavenly host. And though I do not suppose that the angel delivered his message in the cadence which we call recitative, I have no doubt but the chorus was a song, sweetly melodious as from blest voices; a song which the redeemed and the angels of the Lord are still singing before the throne; a new song (Rev. v. 9), a song which will be always new. We are made acquainted with the subject, yea, with the very words of this song. May our hearts be suitably affected by the consideration of them today! The melody and harmony of heaven are far above our conceptions. The music of that happy land has no dependence upon the vibrations of the air, or the admirable structure of the human ear. But we have reason to believe there is, in the world of light and love, something analogous to what we call music, though different in kind, and vastly superior in effect to any strains that can be produced by the most exquisite voices or instruments upon earth; as we readily judge the glory of an angel to be unspeakably more excellent, both in kind and in degree, than anything that is deemed glorious among mortals.

To consider this passage at large would require many discourses. I shall confine myself at present to a few brief reflections on the circumstances of this heavenly vision, the message of the angel, and the concluding chorus or song.

I. The circumstances.

1. Lo, an angel came upon them, &c.—Suddenly, when they had no expectation of such a visit, without anything that might previously engage their attention, all at once, like a flash of lightning, a glory shone around them, and an angel appeared. We do not wonder that they were impressed with fear. We live near, perhaps in the midst of, an invisible world, full of great and wonderful realities, which yet, by too many persons, are considered and treated as nonentities, because they are not perceived by our bodily senses. But the scripture assures us of the fact; and to reject this testimony, because it is not confirmed by our senses, is no less irrational and unphilosophical than impious. A man born blind can have no more conception of light and colours than we have of what passes in the world of spirits. And a nation of blind men, if there were such a nation, would probably treat a seeing person as a visionary madman, if he spoke to them of what he saw. But he would be sure of his own perceptions, though he could not satisfy the inquiries and cavils of the blind. Our senses are accommodated to our present state; but there may be a multitude of objects, as real in themselves, and as near to us, as any that we behold with our eyes, of which we, for want of suitable faculties, can have no idea. To deny this, and to make our senses the criteria of the existence of things which are not within their reach, is exactly such an absurdity as a blind man would be guilty of, who should deny the possibility of a rainbow, because he never heard it or felt it. However, faith is the evidence of things not seen. And they who believe the word of God cannot doubt of the existence of an invisible state and invisible agents. The barrier between the inhabitants of that state and us is too strong to be passed, for the will of the great Creator seems to be the barrier. Otherwise it is probable they could easily surprise us, since, upon special occasions, they have been permitted to discover themselves. We have a natural dread of such visitants, even though they should appear to us, as they did to the shepherds, as messengers of peace and mercy from God. Yet we must shortly mingle with them. Death will introduce us into the world of spirits, and what we shall then meet with, what beings will be ready to accost us upon our first entrance into that unknown, unchangeable state, who can say? It deserves our serious thought. We are now encompassed by the objects of sense, but we must be soon separated from them all. We live in a crowd, but we must die alone. Happy are they, who, like Stephen, shall be able to commend their departing spirits into the hands of Jesus! He is Lord of all worlds, and has the keys of hades, of the invisible state.

2. The angel spoke—The gospel was preached by an angel to Zacharias, to the virgin mother of Messiah, now to the shepherds; and, perhaps, to none but these. The angel, who appeared to Cornelius, said nothing to him of Jesus, but only directed him to send for Peter, Acts x. 4, 5. The glorious gospel of the blessed God, with respect to its dignity, depth, and importance, may seem a fitter theme for the tongue of an angel than of a man; but, angels never sinned, and though they might proclaim its excellency, they could not, from experience,

speak of its efficacy. In this respect sinful worms are better qualified to preach to others, concerning him by whom they have themselves been healed and saved. Their weakness, likewise, is better suited to shew that the influence and success of the gospel is wholly owing to the power of God. It has therefore pleased God to put this treasure into earthen vessels, and to commit the ministry of his word, not to angels, but to men. They whom he is pleased to employ in this office, however weak and unworthy in themselves, derive an honour and importance from the message entrusted to them, and are so far worthy of the same attention, as if an angel from heaven spoke. They are sinful men, and have reason to think humbly of themselves: nor should they, as the servants of a suffering, crucified Master, either wonder or complain if they meet with unkindness from those whom they wish to serve; but they may magnify their office, (Rom. xi. 13.) and it is at the peril of their hearers to despise it. What the world accounts in us the foolishness of preaching, is made to those who simply receive it, the wisdom and power of God. To others, even angels would preach in vain. They who hear not Moses and the prophets, who submit not to the ordinary methods and means of grace which God has appointed, would not be persuaded, though one should rise from the dead

3. The angel was sent with the most interesting news that could be made known to mankind; not to Cæsar, or to Herod, or to the High Priest, but to obscure and lowly shepherds. The Lord seeth not as man seeth; the petty distinctions that obtain among men are not regarded by him. He is equally near to them that fear him in every situation of life, as the sun shines, as freely and fully, upon a cottage as upon a palace. These shepherds were doubtless, of the number of the happy few, who, in that time of degeneracy, were waiting and longing for the consolation of Israel. The heads of the Jewish people found their consolation in their rank and wealth, and in the respect paid them by the vulgar. These things usually add to the idea of self-importance, and feed those tempers which are most displeasing to the Lord, and which indispose the mind to the reception of the gospel, or to any due inquiry concerning it. And thus, in fact from age to age, it has generally been hidden from the wise and the great, and revealed unto babes. The magi, or wise men who lived in the east, where the knowledge of astronomy obtained, but where the scripture was not known, were guided to Messiah by the appearance of a new star or meteor. The shepherds, who were acquainted with the prophecies concerning Messiah, were informed of their accomplishment by an angel. Thus the Lord was pleased to suit the different manner of making known his will, to the previous situation of the persons.

II. The message of the angel, though concise, was comprehensive and full. It contained the Fact, “Unto you is born this day”—the Place, “In the city of David,” that is, in Bethlehem, so called, because David likewise had been born there (Luke ii. 4.)—the Office of Messiah, “A Saviour”—his Name, Honour, and Character, “Christ,” or the Anointed; “the Lord,” the head and king of Israel,

and of the church, the Lord of all. I do but recite these particulars now, as they will repeatedly offer to our consideration in the series of subjects before me. The description of the state in which they would find him, was such, as could only be reconciled to his titles and honours, by that simple faith, which, without vain reasoning, acquiesces in the declarations of God. For how unlikely would it seem to a merely human judgment, that the Saviour of sinners, the promised Messiah, the Lord of all, should be a babe wrapped in swaddling-clothes, and lying in a manger. Yet thus it was. Though rich in himself, he became poor for our sakes, 2 Cor. viii. 9. On this account, as the scriptures had foretold, he was despised and rejected of men. Though he came to his own, as a Lord, or Master to his own house; yet, coming in this manner, his own professed servants, who pretended that they were longing and waiting for him, slighted and opposed him; preferred a notorious malefactor to him, and put him to death as an impostor and blasphemer. But the shepherds reasoned not through unbelief, and therefore they were not staggered: they obeyed the message, they went, they saw, they believed.

The seeming repugnance between the greatness of Messiah's claims, and the state of humiliation in which he appeared when upon earth, was the great stumbling-block then, and continues to be so at this day. Because he stooped so low, and made himself of no reputation, too many still refuse to acknowledge his divine character. But they who are willing to be taught by the word and Spirit of God, see a beauty and propriety in his submitting to be born in a stable, and to live as a poor man, destitute of house or property. Hereby he poured contempt upon worldly pomp and vanity, sanctified the state of poverty to his followers, and set them an encouraging example to endure it with cheerfulness. They, like the shepherds and his first disciples, are delivered from their natural prejudices, and are enabled to behold his glory, through the veil of his outward humiliation, as the glory of the only begotten of the Father. And his condescension in becoming poor for their sakes, that they through his poverty might be made rich, affects their hearts with admiration and gratitude.

But though too many, who are governed by the spirit and maxims of this world, are far from admiring his love, in assuming our nature under those circumstances, which, from his infancy to his death, exposed him to the contempt of his enemies, it is otherwise thought of in yonder world of light. For we read, that when the angel had declared to the shepherds the glad tidings, a multitude of the heavenly host expressed their joy by a song, which is the next subject that offers to our consideration.

III. Their highest praise was excited by a view of the effects which this unexampled love would produce.

1. "Glory to God in the highest." In the highest heaven, in the highest degree, for this highest instance of his mercy. At the creation these morning-stars sung for joy, Job xxxviii. 7. But redemption was a greater work than they had yet

seen, and a work by which his goodness, wisdom, and power, would be still more abundantly magnified. The glory of God, the exhibition of his adorable perfections, to the view of intelligent creatures, is the last and highest end of all his works. Nor would it be worthy of the infinite eternal God, in comparison with whose immensity, the aggregate of all created good is no more than a point compared with the universe, or a single ray of light compared with the sun, to propose anything short of his own glory, as the ultimate, final cause of his designs. And in proportion as any finite intelligences are conformed to the will of their Creator, and impressed with a sense of his pre-eminence, their highest end and aim will be the same with his. If, therefore, we compare the glory of God and the good of his creatures together, we may refer to them what our Lord was pleased to declare of the two great commandments. The former is incomparably the first and greatest of his ends; the second, in its proper place and subordination, is like unto it, and inseparably connected with it, or rather derived from it. The former is, if I may so speak, the essential difference of the divine operations; the latter, so far as consistent with it, is the result of a glorious and efficacious property of his consummate excellence. In the redemption of fallen man, both are displayed to the highest advantage. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will towards men."

The glory of his goodness:—this shines bright in the capacities and happiness he has communicated to angels; but it shines with greater brightness in the mercy afforded to mankind; whether we consider the objects, who are sinners, rebels, and enemies; or his purpose in their favour, not only to restore the life they had forfeited, but to bestow it more abundantly (John x. 10), with respect to title, security and honour; or lastly, and principally, the mean by which their deliverance from everlasting misery, and their possession of everlasting happiness, is procured; and which could only be procured by the humiliation and death of the Son of his love.

The glory of his wisdom, in adjusting the demands of his holiness, justice and truth, with the purposes of his mercy;—in providing such a method for the exercise of his mercy, as renders his displeasure against sin more conspicuous by pardoning, than by punishing it;—in abasing the sinner's pride, by the very considerations which inspire his hope and confidence; so that while he confesses himself unworthy of the very air that he breathes, he is encouraged and warranted to claim a participation in all the blessings of grace and glory:—and finally, in proposing motives, which, when rightly understood, are always found sufficient to influence the heart, even though it has been habitually hardened in sin, long deaf to the voice of reason, conscience, and interest, and equally unaffected by the judgments or the mercies of God, till enlightened to perceive the excellency of the gospel.

The glory of his power, in making all the acts of free agents, through a long succession of ages, subservient to this great purpose, not excepting those who

most laboured to obstruct it;—in changing the disposition of the sinner, however obstinate;—and in carrying on his work of grace, when once begun, in such feeble inconsistent creatures as men are, in defiance of all difficulties and opposition arising from within or without.

These are subjects which the angels desire to look into (1 Pet i. 12), which fill the most exalted intelligences with admiration. The glory of God was manifested, was celebrated in the highest heavens, when Messiah was born of a woman.

2. The great design and effect of his appearance with regard to mankind, is peace. “On earth peace.” Man, as a fallen creature, is in a state of war and rebellion against his Maker. He has renounced his allegiance and dependence, is become his own end. He is now against God, disobedient to his laws, and disaffected to his government. And his conscience, if not stupefied and cauterized by frequent resistance of conviction, suggests that God is against him. He feels he is not happy here, he fears he shall be miserable hereafter. This apprehension strengthens his aversion from God. And, indeed, without an express assurance from the Lord himself, whom he has offended, that there is forgiveness with him, he would not only fear, but sink into despair, if he rightly understood the horrid enormity of a state of alienation from the blessed God. But infinite wisdom and mercy have provided, and propounded a method, by which the honour of the divine perfections and government are secured, and pardon and peace vouchsafed to rebels. God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself. The knowledge of this mercy, when revealed to the sinner’s heart, subdues his enmity, constrains him to throw down his arms, and to make an unreserved submission and surrender of himself; forms him to a temper of love and confidence, and disposes him to habitual and cheerful obedience. Now mercy and truth are met together, righteousness and peace have kissed each other (Psal. lxxxv. 10); and God is glorified in the highest, for peace proclaimed upon the earth.

The expression of “good will towards men,” seems to rise upon the former. Not only peace, but acceptance and adoption in the Beloved. Sinners who believe in the Son of God, are not merely delivered from the condemnation they have deserved, but are united to their Saviour; considered as one with him, his children, the members of his body, and made partakers of his life, and his glory. God is their portion, and heaven is their home. The Lord’s satisfaction in this, as the greatest of all his works, is expressed by the prophet in such astonishing terms of condescension, as surpass our utmost conceptions; and we can only say, Lord, what is man that thou art thus mindful of him! We believe, admire, and adore. “The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty: He will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy, he will rest in his love, he will rejoice over thee with singing,” Zeph. iii. 17.

Assuredly this song of the heavenly host is not the language of our hearts by nature. We once sought our pleasure and happiness in a very different way. We

were indifferent to the glory of God, and strangers to his peace. And some of us are still blind to the excellencies of the gospel, and deaf to its gracious invitations. But we must not expect to sing with the great company of the redeemed hereafter, before the throne of glory, unless we learn, and love their song while we are here, Rev. xiv. 3. They who attain to the inheritance of the saints in light, are first made meet for it in the present life, and in this way. They believe the testimony of the scripture respecting their own guilt, unworthiness, and helplessness; then they receive the record which God has given of his Son. They renounce all confidence in the flesh (Phil. iii. 3); they rejoice in Christ Jesus, and from his fulness they derive grace to worship God in the Spirit. A sense of their obligations to the Saviour, disposes them to praise him now as they can; and they rejoice in hope of seeing him ere long as he is, and that then they shall praise him as they ought. For heaven itself, as described in the word of God, could not be a state of happiness to us, unless we are like-minded with the apostle, to account all things loss and dung for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord.