

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.

COMPLETE IN ONE VOLUME.

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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 WOOLNETH,

LOMBARD STREET,

LONDON.

———Ah!

Tantanne 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 XVII.

MESSIAH DESPISED AND REJECTED OF MEN.

He is despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.
ISAIAH, liii. 3.

THE heathen moralists, ignorant of the character and perfections of God, the true dignity and immortality of the soul, and the root and extent of human depravity, had no better foundation for what they called virtue than pride; no higher aim in their regulations, than the interests of society and the conduct of civil life. They expressed, indeed, occasionally, some sentiments of a superior kind; but these, however just and valuable upon the principles of revelation, were delusive and impracticable upon their own. And Brutus, one of the most admired characters of antiquity, confessed, just before he put an end to his own life, that having long been enamoured of virtue as a real good, he found it, at last, to be but an empty name. But though they had so little satisfaction, or success, in the pursuit of virtue, they were so pleased with the idea they formed of it, as generally to suppose, that if virtue should become visible, it would necessarily engage the esteem and admiration of mankind.

There was, however; one remarkable exception to this opinion. The wisdom of Socrates seems to have been, in many respects, different from that of the bulk of their philosophers. Socrates having expressed his idea of a perfect character, a truly virtuous man, ventured to predict the reception such a person, if such a one could ever be found, would meet with from the world. And he thought that his practice would be so dissimilar to that of other men, his testimony against their wickedness so strong, and his endeavours to reform them so importunate and unwelcome, that instead of being universally admired, he would be disliked and hated; that mankind were too degenerate and too obstinate to bear either the example or the reproof of such a person, and would most probably revile and persecute him, and put him to death as an enemy to their peace.

In this instance, the judgment of Socrates accords with the language of the Old, and with the history of the New Testament. Messiah was this perfect character. As such Isaiah describes him. He likewise foresaw how he would be treated, and foretold that he would be numbered with transgressors, despised and rejected, by the very people who were eye-witnesses of his upright and benevolent conduct. And thus, in fact, it proved. When Jesus was upon earth, true virtue and goodness were visibly displayed, and thereby the wickedness of man became signally conspicuous. For they among whom he was conversant, preferred a robber and a murderer to him, John. xviii. 40. They preserved Barabbas, who had been justly

doomed to die for enormous crimes, and they nailed Jesus, in his stead, to the cross.

When Messiah appeared, the Jews professed to blame the wickedness of their fore-fathers, who had opposed and slain the prophets. If they regretted the ill-treatment the servants of God had formerly received, might it not be hoped that they would reverence his Son? (Mat. xxi. 47.) concerning whom, under his character of Messiah, their expectations were raised by the scriptures, which were read in their synagogues every sabbath-day.

But he was despised and rejected of men. Angels sung praises at his birth, but men despised him. He took not upon him the nature of angels, but of man; yet men rejected him. Sinful, helpless men rejected and despised the only Saviour. He came to his own, but his own received him not. How lamentable and fatal was their obstinacy! Pretended Messiahs were eagerly regarded and followed by them (John v. 43.), but the true Messiah was despised and rejected of men!

Let us consider the clauses of the text separately, in the order in which we read them.

I. He was despised and rejected of men. It would be a great mistake to imagine that the Jews were the only people capable of this ingratitude and obstinacy. If any person here thinks, surely I would not have despised him, had I seen his wonderful works, and heard him speak as never man spake: possibly that thought may prove you to be of the very same spirit with those who, while they thirsted for his blood, ignorantly presumed, that if they had lived in the days of their forefathers, they would not have joined with them in persecuting the prophets, Mat. xxiii. 31. The prejudices which operated so strongly against our Lord's mission and ministry, were not peculiar to the people of one age or country, but such as are deeply rooted in the nature of fallen man. The same principles which influenced the Jews to oppose and despise his person, still influence multitudes to slight and oppose the doctrine which he taught, and which he commanded his disciples to preach and perpetuate to the end of the world. In proof of this, it will be sufficient to assign some of the principal causes of the contempt and hatred which he met with from the men of that generation.

1. They despised him for what they accounted the meanness of his appearance. Though rich in himself, he became poor for our sakes, and his poverty made him contemptible in their eyes. They expected Messiah would appear with external pomp and power. But when they saw him, they scorned him, saying, "Is not this the carpenter's son?" Mat. xiii. 55. He who had not money to pay the tribute demanded of him (Mat. xvii. 27.), nor a house wherein to lay his head, was of small esteem with those who were covetous, proud of worldly distinctions, and fond of the praise and admiration of men.

2. Their contempt was heightened, when this poor man publicly asserted his proper character and claim, demanded their attention and homage, and styled himself in a peculiar sense the Son of God, the resurrection and the life, John v. 18; xi. 25. For this seeming inconsistency between the appearance he made and the honours he assumed, they treated him as a demoniac and a madman, John x. 20. Their language strongly expressed their sentiments of him, when they asked him with disdain, “Art thou greater than our father Abraham? Whom makest thou thyself?” John viii. 53.

3. They objected to him the low state and former characters of his followers. Some of them were of low rank in life. The most of those who constantly attended him were poor fishermen. Others had been of bad repute, publicans, and open sinners. For this they reproached him, and thought they were fully justified in their contempt, while they could say, “Have any of the rulers or Pharisees believed on him?” John vii. 48.

4. They were further exasperated against him by the authority and severity with which he taught. It is true, he was gentle and meek to all who felt their need of his help, or sincerely desired his instruction. He received them without exception, and treated them with the greatest tenderness. But he vindicated the honour of the law of God, from the corrupt doctrine and tradition of their professed teachers. He exposed and unmasked the hypocrisy of their most admired characters, and compared the men who were in the highest reputation for wisdom and sanctity, to whitened sepulchres, warning the people against them as blind guides and deceivers.

5. These blind guides strengthened the prejudices of their blind followers against him, by misrepresentation. They attempted to avail themselves of the scripture, when they thought it would answer their purpose. They eagerly made the most of a prevailing mistake, that Jesus was born in Galilee, because he was brought up in Nazareth from his infancy. This they urged as a proof that he could not be Messiah, who the prophets had declared was to be born at Bethlehem in Judea. When he healed diseases on the sabbath-day, they represented the effects of his compassion as a breach of that strict observance of the Sabbath which was enjoined by the law of Moses, and that therefore he could not be of God, John ix. 16. And when they were not able to deny the reality of his wonderful works, they ascribed them to the agency of Satan, Mat. xii. 24. We, at this distance of time, can easily perceive the folly and madness of their attempts. But the Scribes and Pharisees were the public authorized doctors and teachers of the people, and were supported by the ecclesiastical and civil power; or, as we should now express it, by church and state. The people were not apt to suspect their leaders, whom they thought wiser and better than themselves; or, if sometimes they hesitated, were impressed by the majesty of his words, or the evidence of his miraculous works, and constrained to say, “Is not this the son of David?” (Mat. xii. 23) they were

soon intimidated and silenced by canons and laws; for it was carefully enacted, in order to keep them in subjection, that whoever acknowledged him should be put out of the synagogues (John ix. 22; xii, 48), that is, according to our modern language, excommunicated. This among the Jews, as it has often since been among Christians, was a punishment which drew after it terrible consequences. A man must be in good earnest, or rather taught and supported by the grace of God, who could resist such arguments as these.

These things are easily applicable to the church history of succeeding times. The gospel of Christ has often been, and is to this day, rejected and despised upon similar grounds. Its simplicity and plainness, and the manner of its proposal, adapted to the use and capacity of the vulgar, offend those who are wise in their own conceit, and proud of their understanding and taste. At the same time are equally disgusted by the sublimity of its doctrines, which will not submit to the test of their vain reasonings, and can only be received by humble faith. The faithfulness and freedom which its ministers are enjoined to use, give great offence likewise. And because they cannot comply with the humours of those who wish them to prophesy smooth things and deceits, they are accounted censorious, uncharitable, and disturbers of the public peace. Again, the dislike and opposition it frequently meets with from persons of great titles and high stations, deter multitudes from pursuing those inquiries, which some conviction of the truth would prompt them to, were they not discouraged by the fear of consequences. How often has a dread of the displeasure of doctors, bishops, universities, councils, and popes, or an ignorant, slavish deference to their judgment or decisions, prevented people from following that light which had begun to force itself upon their consciences? How few among those of reputation for wisdom and learning, how few of the great and opulent, have encouraged or espoused the doctrine of the cross? It is, therefore, more properly a subject for lamentation than for wonder, that this way is despised, and almost everywhere spoken against, Acts xxviii. 22. Farther, as the bulk of those who embrace it are of low condition, so many of them are as free to confess to the praise of the grace of God, as others can be to urge it to their reproach, that till they knew and received this despised gospel, their characters and practices were vile. Lastly, what unhappy subtlety has been employed, in a way of reason and with an appeal to detached and perverted passages of scripture, to misrepresent the work of the Holy Spirit, as folly, hypocrisy, enthusiasm, and even to charge the gospel itself with giving encouragement to a licentious conduct! In short, the spirit of the world, the arts and influence of designing men are so powerful, that what our Lord said in Judea holds equally true in christendom, "Blessed is he who is not offended in me!" Mat. xi. 6.

I have reserved to a distinct paragraph the mention of one cause why the gospel is frequently despised and reproached. Because, though it be no less unjust and

unreasonable than those which I have recited, it is more immediately incumbent upon all who name the name of Christ, to prevent it as much as possible; I mean, the scandal which arises from the miscarriages of those who profess it. Offences of this kind must come, but woe to them by whom they come, Mat. xviii. 7. There were pretended Christians, even in the apostles times, who were enemies to the cross of Christ (Phil. iii. 18), and by their evil conduct, caused the ways of truth to be evil spoken of; and therefore, we cannot be surprised that there are such persons now. But you that love the Lord, hate evil, Psal. xcvi. 10. There are many who watch for your halting, and are ready to say, There! there so we would have it. It would be in vain for ministers to declare that the doctrines of grace are doctrines according to godliness, unless our testimony is supported by the tempers and conduct of our people: the world will probably judge, rather by what they see in you, than by what they hear from us. Nor will it suffice that they cannot say you are an adulterer, a drunkard, a miser, or a cheat. If you espouse our doctrine, they will expect you to be humble, meek, patient, and benevolent; to find integrity in all your dealings, and a punctual discharge of your duty in every branch of relative life. What must the world think of our principles, if they who avow them are fretful, envious, censorious, discontented, slothful, or unfaithful; or if they are niggardly and hard-hearted, or voluptuous and dissolute, or implacable and revengeful! they who thus lay stumbling-blocks before the blind, and confirm the prejudices of the ignorant, will have much to answer for.

II. It is farther said, he was a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.—He was surrounded with sorrows on every side, and grief was his intimate, inseparable companion. Surely this consideration, if any, will animate us to endure the cross, and to despise the shame we may be exposed to for his sake. The illustration of this subject we will offer more fully in the sequel. It shall suffice, at present, to assign three causes for his continual sorrows,

1. The outward course of life, to which he submitted, for the sake of sinners, exposed him to want, weariness, contempt, and opposition. And though his resignation and patience were perfect, yet he was truly a man, and partaker of our nature, with all its affections and sensibilities which do not imply sin. His feelings, therefore, were human, similar to our own in similar circumstances, and they were often painfully exercised. Once and again we read that he was hungry and had no food; he was thirsty (Mat. iv. 9; xxi. 18; John iv. 2), and was nearly refused a little water to drink, when wearied with his journeying in the heat of the day. His character was slandered, his person despised, his words insidiously wrested, and his actions misrepresented. He was misunderstood even by his friends, betrayed by one disciple, denied by another, and forsaken by the rest, John vii. 5. It is hardly possible for his followers to meet with any outward trial, which may not remind

them of some part of the history of their Lord and Master, who left them an example of suffering, that they should cheerfully follow his steps, 1 Pet. ii. 21.

2. His perfect knowledge and foresight of those sufferings which we emphatically call his Passion. How often does he speak of them, and describe the circumstances as if they were actually present? Futurity is, in mercy, concealed from us. It would often bereave us of all present comfort, if we knew what the next year, or, perhaps, what the next day would bring forth. If some of you could have foreseen, many years ago, what you have since been brought through, you would probably have sunk under the apprehension; or the stoutest of us might sink now, if we were certainly to know what may be yet before us. But Jesus, long before he made atonement for our sins, had counted the cost. And though his love determined him to save us, the prospect, which was continually present to his view, of the approaching unutterable agonies of his soul, of all that he must endure from God, from the powers of darkness, and from wicked men, when he should be made a curse for us, to redeem us from the curse of the law (Gal. iii. 13.); I say, this tremendous prospect was, doubtless, a perpetual source of sorrow.

3. The frame of his spirit. Whoever has a measure of the mind that was in Christ, must be proportionally burdened and grieved, like righteous Lot in Sodom (2 Pet. ii. 8), with the wickedness around him, if he lives in society. Who that has any regard for the honour of God, or the souls of men, can hear and see what passes every hour; how the authority of God is affronted, his goodness abused, and his mercy despised, without emotions of grief and compassion? If we are spiritually-minded, we must be thus affected; and we should be more so, if we were more spiritual. But the holiness of Messiah, and, consequently, his hatred of sin, was absolutely perfect. His view of the guilt and misery of sinners was likewise comprehensive and clear. How must he be therefore grieved by the wickedness and insensibility of those with whom he daily conversed! especially as he not only observed the outward conduct of men, but had an intimate knowledge of the evil heart, which is hidden from us. In this sense his sufferings and sorrows began with his early years, and continued throughout the whole of his life. He undoubtedly could say, with an emphasis peculiar to himself, "I beheld the transgressors, and was grieved; rivers of waters run down my eyes, because men keep not thy law." Psa. cxix. 156, 158.

We call ourselves the followers and servants of him, who was despised of men, and encompassed with sorrows. And shall we then seek great things for ourselves (Jer. xlv. 5), as if we belonged to the present world, and expected no portion beyond it? Or shall we be tremblingly alive to the opinion of our fellow-creatures, and think it a great hardship, if it be our lot to suffer shame for his sake, who endured the cross, and despised the shame for us? Rather may we account such disgrace our glory, and every loss and suffering, that we may endure for him, a gain;

while on the other hand we learn, with the apostle Paul, to esteem every gain and honour this world can afford, to be but loss and dung in comparison of the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord, Phil. iii. 8.