

THE
WORKS
OF
THE REV . JOHN NEWTON

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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 II.

THE HARBINGER.

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a high-way for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. ISAIAH, xl. 3-5.

THE general style of the prophecies is poetical. The inimitable simplicity which characterizes every part of divine revelation, is diversified according to the nature of the subject; and the magnificence and variety of imagery which constitute the life and spirit of poetry, evidently distinguish the style of the Psalms, or Isaiah, and the other poetical books, from that of the historical, even in the common versions. The various rules and properties of Hebrew poetry are not, at this distance of time, certainly known. But the present Bishop of London*, in his elegant and instructive lectures on the subject, and in the discourse prefixed to his translation of Isaiah, has fully demonstrated one property. It usually consists either of parallel, or contrasted sentences. The parallel expressions (excepting in the book of Proverbs) are most prevalent. In these the same thought, for substance, expressed in the first member, is repeated, with some difference of phrase, in the following; which, if it enlarges or confirms the import of what went before, seldom varies the idea. Almost any passage I first cast my eye upon, will sufficiently explain my meaning. For instance, in the fifty-ninth chapter of Isaiah:

Ver. 1. Behold the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save;

Neither is his ear heavy, that it cannot hear.

9. Therefore is judgment far from us,

Neither doth justice overtake us:

We wait for light, but behold obscurity;

For brightness, but we walk in darkness.

So in chap. lv. 2.

Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread?

And your labour for that which satisfieth not?

Harken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good,

And let your soul delight itself in fatness.

So likewise in the second Psalm;

Ver. 4. He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh;

* Dr. Lowth.

- The Lord shall have them in derision.
5. Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath,
And vex them in his sore displeasure.

These specimens may suffice for my present purpose. The knowledge of this peculiarity of the poetical idiom, may often save us the trouble of enquiring minutely into the meaning of every single word, when one plain and comprehensive sense arises from a view of the whole passage taken together. This observation applies to the first of the verses in my text. Though it be true that John the Baptist lived for a season retired and unnoticed in a wilderness, and began to preach in the wilderness of Judea, the expression, *The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness*, does not merely foretell that circumstance. The verse consists of two parallels. The prophet, “rapt into future times,” hears a voice proclaiming the approach of Messiah, and this is the majestic language:

In the wilderness prepare ye the way of the Lord,
Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

The wilderness and the desert are the same here, as likewise in chap. xxxv. 1, where the happy, the sudden, the unexpected effects of his appearance are described:—

The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them;
And the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose.

Now, to see, by the eye of faith, the glory of the Redeemer in his appearance; to see power divine preparing the way before him; to enter into the gracious and wonderful design of his salvation; to acknowledge, admire, and adore him as the Lord, and humbly to claim him as our God, must afford a pleasure very different from that which the most excellent music, however well adapted to the words, can possibly give. The latter may be relished by a worldly mind; the former is appropriate, and can only be enjoyed by those who are taught of God.

When the eastern monarchs travelled, harbingers went before to give notice that the King was upon the road, and likewise proper persons to prepare his way and to remove obstacles. Some of them (if we may depend upon history), in the affectation of displaying their pomp and power, effected extraordinary things upon such occasions. For man, though vain, would appear wise; though a sinful worm, he would fain be accounted great. We read of their having actually filled up valleys, and levelled hills, to make a commodious road, for themselves or their armies, through places otherwise impassable. The prophet thus illustrates great things by small, and accommodates the language and usages of men to divine truth. Messiah is about to visit a wilderness world, and those parts of it which he bless-

es with his presence, shall become the garden of the Lord. Till then it is all desolate, rocky, and wild. But his way shall be prepared. Mountainous difficulties shall sink down before him into plains. In defiance of all obstacles, his glory shall be revealed in the wilderness, and all flesh shall see it, for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

The leading ideas respecting Messiah's appearance suggested by this sublime representation, are,

I. The state of the world at his coming,—“A wilderness.”

II. The preparation of his way,—“Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low.”

III. The manner and effects of his manifestation,—“And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it.”

I. The word “wilderness,” I suppose, generally excites the idea of an intricate, solitary, uncultivated, dangerous place. Such is the description Jeremiah gives of that wilderness through which the Lord led Israel, when he had delivered them from Egypt: “A land of deserts and of pits, a land of drought and of the shadow of death, a land that no man passeth through, and where no man dwelt,” Jer. ii. 6. The world, in which we sojourn for a season, does not appear to us in this unpleasing view at first. The spirit, and the things of it, are congenial to our depraved inclinations; and especially in early life, our inexperienced hearts form high expectations from it; and we rather hope to find it a paradise than a wilderness. But when the convincing power of the Holy Spirit opens the eyes of the understanding, we awake as from a dream; the enchantment by which we were deluded is broken, and we then begin to judge rightly of the world: that it is a wearisome wilderness indeed, and that our only important concern with it is to get happily out of it. In a spiritual view, a wilderness is a significant emblem of the state of mankind, both Jews and Heathens, at that period which the apostle calls the fulness of time, when God sent forth his son, Gal. iv. 4.

Israel, once the beloved people of God, was at that time so extremely degenerated, that, a few individuals excepted, the vineyard of the Lord, so highly cultivated, so signally Protected, yielded only wild grapes, Isa. v. 4. Though they were not addicted to imitate the idolatry of the Heathens, as their forefathers had been, they were no less alienated from the true God; and their wickedness was the more aggravated, for being practised under a professed attachment to the forms of his law. They drew nigh to God with their lips, but their hearts were far from him, Mark vii. 6. Their very worship profaned the temple in which they gloried, and the holy house of prayer, through their abominations, was become a den of thieves. They owned the divine authority of the scriptures, and read them with seeming attention, but rendered them of none effect, through the greater attention they paid to the corrupt traditions of their elders. They boasted in their relation to Abra-

ham as their father, but proved themselves to be indeed the children of those who had persecuted and murdered the prophets, Matt. xxiii. 30, 31. The Scribes and Pharisees, who sat in the chair of Moses, and were the public teachers of the people, under an exterior garb of sanctity, of prayer, and fasting, were guilty of oppression, fraud, and uncleanness; and while they trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others, their real character was a combination of pride and hypocrisy. Therefore he who knew their hearts, and saw through all their disguises, compared them to painted sepulchres, fair to outward appearance, but within full of filth and impurity, Matt. xxiii. 27. From the spirit of these blind guides, we may judge of the spirit of the blind people who held them in admiration, and were willingly directed and led by them. Thus was the faithful city become a harlot: it was once full of judgment, righteousness lodged in it, but now murderers, Isa. i. 21. Such a wilderness was Judea when Messiah condescended to visit it.

Among the Heathens, ignorance, idolatry, sensuality, and cruelty universally prevailed. Their pretended wise men had indeed talked of wisdom and morality from age to age, but their speculations were no more than swelling words of vanity, cold, trifling, uncertain, and without any valuable influence either upon themselves or upon others. They had philosophers, poets, orators, musicians, and artists, eminent in their way; but the nations reputed the most civilized were overwhelmed with abominable wickedness equally with the rest. The shocking effect of their idolatry upon their moral principles and conduct, notwithstanding their attainments in arts and science, is described by the apostle in the close of the first chapter of his epistle to the Romans. With great propriety, therefore, the state of the world, both Jew and Gentile, considered in a moral view, is compared by the prophet to a wilderness—a barren and dreary waste. The pursuits and practices of the world were diametrically opposite to the spirit and design of that kingdom which Messiah was about to set up, and therefore, as the event proved, directly disposed to withstand his progress. But,

II. Before his appearance a way was prepared for him in the wilderness.

The providence of God, by a gradual train of dispensations, disposed the political state of mankind in a subserviency to this great event. All the commotions and revolutions which take place in the kingdoms of the earth are so many detached parts of a complicated but wisely-determined plan, of which the establishment of Messiah's kingdom is the final cause. The kings and politicians of the world are not aware of this. God is not in their thoughts. But while they pursue their own ends, and make havoc of the peace of mankind, to gratify their own interests and ambition, and look no higher, they are ignorantly, and without intention, acting as instruments of the will of God. The wrath of man is over-ruled to his praise and his pur-

pose (Psal. lxxvi. 10), and succeeds so far as it is instrumental to the accomplishment of his designs, and no farther. While they move in this line, their schemes, however injudiciously laid, and whatever disproportion there may seem between the means they are possessed of and the vast objects they aim at, prosper beyond their own expectations; but the remainder of their wrath he will restrain. Their best projected and best supported enterprises issue in shame and disappointment, if they are not necessary parts of that chain of causes and events which the Lord of all has appointed. Thus Sennacherib, when sent by the God whom he knew not to execute his displeasure against the kingdom of Judah, had, for a time, a rapid and uninterrupted series of conquests (Isa. xxxvii. 26-29); but his attempt upon Jerusalem was beyond the limits of his commission, and therefore failed.

Among the principal instruments who were appointed to prepare a way in the wilderness for Messiah, and to facilitate the future spread of his kingdom, we may take notice of Alexander; and this designation secured his success, though the extravagancies, excesses, and rashness which marked his character, were sufficient to have rendered his undertakings abortive, had he not been in the hand of the Lord of hosts, as an axe or a saw in the hand of the workman. By his conquests the knowledge of the Greek language was diffused among many nations; and the Hebrew scriptures being soon afterwards translated into that language an expectation of some great deliverer was raised far and wide, before Messiah appeared. When this service was fulfilled, the haughty presumptuous worm who had been employed in it, was no longer necessary, and therefore was soon laid aside: and all his proud designs, for the establishment of his own family and dominion, perished with him. His empire was divided towards the four winds of heaven, and this division likewise contributed to bring forward the purpose of God, Dan. viii. 8. For each of the four kingdoms established by his successors being thus separated, became a more easy prey to the Roman power. This power, which had been gradually increasing and extending in the course of several hundred years, was at its height about the time of our Lord's birth. The greatest part of the habitable earth which was at that time distinctly known was united under one empire, composed of various kingdoms and governments, which, though once independent and considerable, were then no more than Roman provinces; and as all the provinces had an immediate connexion with Rome, a way was thus prepared, and an intercourse opened on every side, for the promulgation of the gospel.

Among the Jews, the professing people of God, a way was prepared for Messiah by the ministry of his harbinger, John the Baptist, who came in the spirit and power of Elijah (as had been foretold of him by the prophets, particularly by the last of the prophets, Malachi), preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, and proclaiming that the Saviour and

his kingdom were at hand. He who sent him accompanied his mission with a divine power. A multitude of persons, of various descriptions, were impressed by his message, insomuch that John himself seems to have been astonished at the numbers and characters of those who came to his baptism.

When the ministry of John had thus previously disposed the minds of many for the reception of Messiah, and engaged the attention of the people at large, Messiah himself entered upon his public office, on the same scene and among the same people. As he increased, John willingly decreased. So the morning star ceases to be seen as the sun advances above the horizon. This distinguished servant of God having finished his work, was removed to a better world. Not in the triumphant manner in which Elijah was translated, but as he came to announce a new dispensation, under which believers were to expect opposition and ill-treatment, to walk by faith, and frequently to be called to seal their testimony with their blood, he was permitted to fall a sacrifice to the revenge of a wanton woman; and though we are assured that none of the race of Adam was greater in the estimation of God than he, his death was asked and procured as the reward of an idle dance, Matt. xi. 11; xiv. 8-11.

III. The latter part of my text describes the manner and immediate effects of Messiah's appearance during his personal ministry, with an intimation of its future and more extensive consequences.

The valleys shall be exalted:—A valley is an emblem of a low condition. Such was the condition of most of our Lord's followers; but his notice and favour exalted them highly. He came to preach the gospel to the poor, to fill the hungry with good things, to save the chief of sinners, to open a door of hope and salvation to persons of the vilest and most despicable characters in human estimation. Such, for instance, was the woman mentioned by the evangelist Luke, chap. vii. 37, 38. The Pharisee thought our Lord dishonoured himself by permitting such a one to touch him, nor had she a word to say in her own behalf. But the compassionate Saviour highly exalted her, when he vouchsafed to plead her cause, to express his gracious acceptance of her tears and love, and to assure her that her sins, though many, were all forgiven. Very low likewise was the state of the malefactor on the cross; he had committed great crimes, was suffering grievous torments, and in the very jaws of death, Luke xxiii. 42. But grace visited his heart; he was plucked as a brand out of the fire, and exalted to paradise and glory. The world accounts the proud happy, and honours the covetous if they be prosperous. But true honour cometh from God. They who are partakers of the faith and hope of the gospel, and have interest in the precious promises, are indeed the rich, the happy, the excellent of the earth, however they may be unnoticed or despised by their fellow-

creatures. The honour of places likewise is to be considered in this light. Bethlehem, though but of little note among the thousands of Judah, was rendered more illustrious by the birth of Messiah than Babylon or Rome. The Galileans were held in contempt by the inhabitants of Jerusalem, as a mean and provincial people; but the places in Galilee which our Lord frequently visited, or where he sometimes resided, are spoken of as exalted unto heaven, by the honour and privilege of his presence, though some of them were no more than fishing-towns. And so at this day, if we have spiritual discernment, we shall judge that a little village, where the gospel is known, prized, and adorned by a suitable conversation, has a dignity and importance far preferable to all the parade of a wealthy metropolis, if destitute of the like privileges.

On the contrary, every mountain and hill shall be brought low.—Messiah came to pour contempt on all human glory. He detected the wickedness and confounded the pride of the Scribes, and Pharisees, and rulers, and made it appear that what is highly esteemed among men, or summit of their boasted excellency, is worthless, yea, abomination in the sight of God, Luke xvi. 15. And by living himself in a state of poverty, and associating chiefly with poor people, he placed the vanity of the distinctions and affluence which mankind generally admire and envy, in the most striking and humiliating light. Such likewise was and will be the effect of his gospel. When faithfully preached, it is found mighty, through God, to the pulling down of strong-holds, high thoughts, and every species of self-exaltation. When the convincing word touches the heart, it has an effect like the handwriting which Belshazzar saw upon the wall, Dan. v. 6. In that day the lofty looks of man are humbled, and his haughtiness bowed down (Isa. ii. 11); he dares no longer plead the goodness of his heart, or trust to the work of his hands. A sense of forgiveness and acceptance through the Beloved, received by faith in his atonement, lays him still lower: he now renounces as loss, for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus the Lord, all that he once esteemed as gain, and is glad that he has nothing to trust or glory in but the cross, Phil. iii. 7, 8. Farther, every mountain that opposes the kingdom of Messiah, in due time must sink into a plain, Zech. iv. 7. Though the nations rage, and the rulers take counsel together, he who sitteth in the heavens will support and maintain his own work, and all their power and policy shall fall before it.

The crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain.—He came to rectify the perverse disposition of the hearts of men, to soften and subdue their obstinate spirits, and to form to himself a willing people in the day of his power. The Jewish teachers, by their traditions and will-worship had given an apparent obliquity to the straight and perfect rule of the law of God, and deformed the beauties of holiness, binding heavy burdens, and

grievous to be borne, upon the conscience; but he vindicated the law from their corrupt glosses, and made the path of obedience plain, practicable, and pleasant.

Thus, the glory of the Lord was revealed.— Not to every eye: many, prejudiced by his outward appearance, and by the low mistaken views the Jews indulged of the office and kingdom of Messiah, whom they expected, could see no form or excellence in him that they should desire him; but his disciples could say, “We beheld his glory,” John i. 14. He spake with authority. His word was power. He controlled the elements, he raised the dead. He knew, and revealed, and judged the thoughts of men’s hearts. He forgave sin, and thus exercised the rights and displayed the perfections of divine sovereignty in his own person. But the prophecy looks forward to future times. After his ascension he filled his apostles and disciples with light and power, and sent them forth in all directions to proclaim his love and grace to a sinful world. Then the glory of the Lord was revealed, and spread from one kingdom to another people. We still wait for the full accomplishment of this promise, and expect a time when the whole earth shall be filled with his glory. For the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it. It is to the power of his word that we owe the continuance of day and night, and the regular return of the seasons of the year. But these appointments are only for a limited term; the hour is coming, when the frame of nature shall be dissolved. Heaven and earth shall pass away; but not a jot or tittle of what he hath declared concerning his kingdom of grace shall fail, till the whole be fulfilled.

Those of you who have heard the Messiah will do well to recollect, whether you were affected by such thoughts as these while this passage was performed; or whether you were only captivated by the music, and paid no more regard to the words than if they had no meaning. They are, however, the great truths of God. May they engage your serious attention, now they are thus set before you!