

THE
WORKS
OF
THE REV . JOHN NEWTON

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

MESSIAH DERIDED UPON THE CROSS.

All they that see me, laugh me to scorn; they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, He trusted in the Lord, that he would deliver him: let him deliver him, seeing he delighted in him. PSALM xxii. 7, 8.

FALLEN man, though alienated from the life of God, and degraded, with respect to many of his propensities and pursuits, to a level with the beasts that perish, is not wholly destitute of kind and compassionate feelings towards his fellow-creatures. While self-interest does not interfere, and the bitter passions of envy, hatred, malice, and revenge, are not roused into exercise, he has a degree of instinctive sympathy with them in their sufferings, and a disposition to assist them, if he can do it without much detriment to himself. The source of these social feelings we express by the term humanity; which seems to imply a consciousness that they properly belong to our nature, and that we ought, at least, to be always, and universally affected in this manner, when occasions offer. But while the heart is under the government of self, our humanity is very partial and limited; and it is to be ascribed to the goodness of God, rather than to any real goodness in man, that it is not wholly extinguished. Were this the case, and were the native evils of the heart left to exert themselves in their full strength and without control, earth would be the very image of hell, and there could be no such thing as society. But to prevent things from running into utter confusion, God mercifully preserves in mankind some social dispositions. They are, however, so weak in themselves, so powerfully counteracted by the stronger principles of our depravity, and so frequently suppressed by obstinate habits of wickedness, that in the present state of things, we may almost as justly define man (whatever impropriety there may seem in the expression), by saying, "He is an inhuman creature," as by ascribing to him the benevolent properties of humanity.

The rage, cruelty, and savage insensibility, with which sin and Satan have poisoned our nature, never appear in so strong a light, as when they assume a religious form; when ignorance, bigotry, and blind zeal, oppose the will and grace of God, under a pretence of doing him service. By this infatuation, every hateful passion is sanctified, and every feeling of humanity stifled. Thus, though the sufferings of the most atrocious malefactors usually excite pity in the spectators, and often draw tears from their eyes, yet the agonies of God's persecuted servants, under the most exquisite tortures which malice could invent, have frequently raised no other emotions than those of derision and scorn. My text leads us to consider the highest instance of this kind. The twenty-second psalm undoubtedly refers to Messiah. It begins with the very words

which he uttered upon the cross; nor could David speak of himself, when he said, "They pierced my hands and my feet." He was God's servant in the most eminent sense; and the service he performed, was an uninterrupted course of benevolence to the souls and bodies of men. He spent his life in going about doing good (Acts i. 38); nor could his enemies fix a single stain upon his conduct. Yet they thirsted for his blood; and, because he came into the world to save sinners, they accomplished their cruel designs. We have already seen how he was treated by the servants and by the soldiers, when condemned by the Jewish council, and by the Roman governor. This prophecy was fulfilled when he hung upon the cross. There have been persons in our own days, whose crimes have excited such detestation, that the populace would probably have torn them in pieces, before, and even after their trial, if they could have had them in their power. Yet when these very obnoxious persons have been executed according to their sentence, if, perhaps, there was not one spectator who wished them to escape, yet neither was one found so lost to sensibility, as to insult them in their dying moments. But when Jesus suffers, all that see him, laugh him to scorn; they shoot out the lip, they shake the head; they insult his character, and his hope. The evangelists furnish us with an affecting comment upon this passage. They inform us by whom he was thus scorned and derided; they mention some circumstances, which strongly mark the peculiar and excessive contempt with which he was treated; and they take notice of the especial scope and object of their insults, namely, the gracious purpose he had often expressed towards sinners, and the strong confidence he had avowed in God his Father.

I. The persons who scorned and derided him were various, and of different characters.

1. The chief priests, elders, and rulers of the people. When these, who were held in ignorant admiration by the multitude, set the example, we do not wonder that it was generally followed. They had been his most avowed and determined enemies, they had long conspired to take away his life, and in the appointed hour their plots were permitted to succeed. They now rejoiced in their success. By their office as teachers and expounders of the law, they ought to have pointed him out to the people as the object of their reverence and hope; but having rejected him themselves, they employed all their authority and influence to make him the object of general contempt. And lest the extremity of his torments should awaken sentiments of commiseration in the multitude, they were the first, and the loudest, in reviling him, as he hung upon the cross.

2. The populace derided him. They had been instigated by the priests to demand his death of Pilate, when he was desirous of dismissing him, and rather to insist that Barabbas should be spared, Matth. xxvii. 20. The populace, though no less ignorant, were less malicious than their leaders. At different times, when they heard his public discourses, and saw his wonderful works,

they had been staggered, and constrained to say, "Is not this the Son of David?" and not many days before, the popular cry had been strongly in his favour (Matth. xxi. 10, 11); though quickly after, it was, "Crucify him, crucify him," Luke xxiii. 21. As the sea, though sometimes smooth, is always disposed to obey the impulse of the wind, so the common people, though easily roused to oppose the truth, would perhaps be quiet, if they were left to themselves; but there are seldom wanting artful and designing men, who, by a pretended regard for religion, and by misrepresentations, work upon their passions and prejudices, and stir them up to a compliance with their purposes. The priests by degrees wrought the populace up, first to reject Messiah, and then to join their leaders in mocking and deriding him.

3. The Roman soldiers, who had contemptuously clothed him with a scarlet robe, and bowed the knee before him in derision, continued to mock him when hanging upon the cross. The Romans, to whom many monarchies were become subject and tributary, affected to despise the name of king; and they held the Jewish nation in peculiar contempt. The title, therefore, of king of the Jews, affixed to his cross, afforded them a subject for the keenest sarcasm.

4. Yea, such is the hardness of the human heart, that one of the malefactors (Luke xxiii. 39), who was crucified by his side, unaffected with his own guilt, and insensible of the just judgment of God, and of the account he was soon to render at his awful tribunal, seemed to seek some relief in the midst of his agonies, by joining with the priests and people, in railing on the innocent Jesus, who was suffering before his eyes. Thus he was the object of universal derision. They who were at the greatest distance in character and sentiment; who differed from, despised, and hated each other, on other accounts, united as one man, in expressing every possible mark of hatred and scorn against him, who had done nothing amiss.

II. They showed their scorn in the most pointed and cruel manner. Not only they who had clamoured for his death derided him, but others who were only passing by upon their ordinary occasions, could not pass on till they had stopped a while to insult him, wagging their heads, and reminding him of what he had formerly said, and charging him with the supposed folly and arrogance of his claims. They jested upon his wants; when he said, "I thirst," they gave him vinegar to drink, mingled with gall. They jested upon his words; when he uttered his dolorous complaint, "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" some of them, with a malicious turn (which possibly was applauded for wit by others), from the sound of the beginning of the sentence, took occasion to suggest, that by saying, *Eli, Eli*, he called for *Elias* the prophet to come to his assistance. Alas! of what dreadful malignity and obduracy is the heart of man capable? How may we conceive the heavenly hosts to have been affected with this scene, when they beheld their Lord the object of their worship and supreme love, thus treated by sinners? But it be-

hoved him thus to suffer (Luke xxiv. 26), for he had undertaken to expiate the sins of many of his murderers, and to offer such satisfaction to the justice and law of God, as might render it consistent with his holiness and truth, to pardon the vilest offenders, who should trust in his name, in all future ages. Therefore there was no voice, arrest, or interposition from the heavenly world—thus he must be tormented, thus he must be scorned, and suspended as a spectacle to angels and to men, till he had paid the full price of redemption, and could say, “It is finished.” Then, and not till then, he bowed his head, and breathed out his spirit into his Father’s hands. There were, however, attestations to his dignity, in this his lowest state. He showed, by his gracious answer to the penitent malefactor, that he had still authority upon earth to forgive sin, and to save to the uttermost; and the sun withdrew his light, and the rocks rent, though daring sinners derided and mocked.

III. The bulk of the people bore their part in this tragedy through precipitation and ignorance. In his prayer for their forgiveness (a prayer which was signally answered after his ascension) he mentioned the only extenuation their wickedness could possibly admit, They knew not what they did. It was otherwise with those who were principally concerned in procuring his death. Long before, when they could not deny the reality of his miracles, they ascribed them to the agency of Beelzebub. By this malicious, wilful opposition to the strongest evidence of fact, against the conviction of their own minds, and by their violent, determined rejection of his mission, they committed the unpardonable sin. They spoke and sinned against the Holy Spirit. This sin no one can have committed, while he is fearful lest he has committed it; for it essentially consists in a deliberate and wilful refusal of the only means of salvation. It is the sign of final absolute impenitence. They who had thus ascribed his miracles to Beelzebub, expressed the same height of enlightened malice against him in his dying agonies, and there was a poignancy in their insults, of which the ignorant multitude were not capable.

1. They reproached his great design, for which he came into the world, “He saved others, himself he cannot save,” Matt, xxvii. 42. How different is the force of the same words, according to the intention of the speaker! When they said “His blood be upon us, and upon our children” (ver. 25), they spoke the very language of the hearts of those who love him, and who derive all their hopes and all their happiness from the application of his blood to their consciences. But, to themselves, it proved the most dreadful imprecation. So, it will be the grateful acknowledgment of his people in time, and to eternity, that when he was resolved to save them, the difficulties in the way were so great, that neither his prayers, nor his tears, nor his unspotted innocence, could prevail to save himself. But, for this his love to sinners, his enemies reviled him. Nor would they have offered to believe if he would come down from the cross, had they supposed there was the least probability of such an event, for

they had often rejected evidence equal to what they now demanded.

2. They reproached him for his trust and confidence in God. He had said that God was his own Father (John v. 18); and they understood him to use the expression in so high a sense, as thereby to make himself equal with God. Had they misunderstood him, had he not really intended what they laid to his charge, surely he would have explained himself. This was the very ground of their proceeding against him before the council, and the formal reason of the sentence of death they pronounced against him. How often did he appeal to the testimony of the scriptures, and of John, whom they durst not but acknowledge to have been a prophet, and to his own mighty works, in support of his claim? But having fastened him upon the cross, they triumphed, and unwittingly expressed their exultation, in the very words which David had foretold should be used to Messiah. So exactly were the scriptures fulfilled, by those who used their utmost endeavours to evade them, and to prevent their accomplishment.

But what is all this to us? It is very much to us. Christ could suffer but once, yet we read of those who crucify him afresh. His gospel represents his personal ministry, declares his character, reveals his love, produces the same effects in those who receive it, and they who oppose it are considered as opposing him, and are influenced by the same spirit which instigated the unbelieving Jews. It is to be hoped that many reject and scorn it, as the multitude did of old, through ignorance, and that the intercession of him who prayed for those that knew not what they did, will prevail for their conversion. Whenever their eyes are opened, they will be pricked to the heart (Acts ii. 37), and will then gladly inquire of those whom they now despise, What they must do to be saved? But it is to be feared, there are in Christian countries many persons who too nearly resemble the spirit and conduct of the Jewish rulers, whose opposition proceeds from rooted enmity to the truth, persisted in against light that has sometimes forced upon their minds, and who, though convinced, will not be persuaded. They who despise, calumniate, and scorn the believers of the gospel, would certainly offer the like treatment to the Author of it, if he was within their reach. They are ill-treated for his sake, and he considers it as an affront to himself. Thus he said to Saul of Tarsus, when breathing out threatenings against his disciples, "Why persecutest thou me?" They who reject his ministers, reject him, Luke x. 16. They who speak disdainfully of his dying himself to save others; they who reproach or ridicule the humble confidence of his people; who censure and revile their hopes and comforts derived from his good word, as enthusiasm or hypocrisy; who have no compassion for their distresses, but rather wound them as with a sword in their bones, saying unto them, Where is now your God? (Psal. cxv. 2.) are certainly treading, if not altogether with equal vehemence, in the footsteps of the Jewish rulers.— May the Lord in mercy show them the danger of their path, and give them a timely apprehension of the destruction to which it leads! That they may hum-

ble themselves to his will, implore his pardon, espouse his cause, and experience the comforts and privileges of that gospel which they have hitherto reviled and scorned.