

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 rern, tam negligenter, agere! TER.

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

PARISHIONERS OF ST. MARY WOOLNOTII,

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 XXII.

MESSIAH UNPITIED, AND WITHOUT COMFORTER.

Reproach [rebuke] hath broken my heart, I am full of heaviness; and I looked for some to take pity, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none.

PSALM. lxi. 20.

THE greatness of suffering cannot be certainly estimated by the single consideration of the immediate apparent cause; the impression it actually makes upon the mind of the sufferer must likewise be taken into the account. That which is a heavy trial to one person, may to another be much lighter, and perhaps no trial at all; and a state of outward prosperity in which the eye of a bystander can see nothing wanting to happiness, may be, and I doubt not often is, a state of torment to the possessor. On the other hand, we know that the consolations with which it has sometimes pleased God to cheer his suffering servants, have enabled them to rejoice in the greatest extremities. They have triumphed upon the rack and while their flesh was consuming by the fire. The Lord has had many followers, who, for his sake, have endured scourgings, and tortures, and terrible deaths, not only without reluctance or dismay, but without a groan. But he himself was terrified, amazed, and filled with anguish, when he suffered for us. Shall we say, The disciples, in such cases, have been superior to their Master, when yet they acknowledged that they derived all their strength and resolution from him? This difference cannot be well accounted for by those who deny that his sufferings were a proper atonement for sin, and who can see no other reason for his death, than that by dying he was to seal the truth of his doctrine, and to propose himself to us as an example of constancy and patience. But the great aggravation of Messiah's sufferings was the suspension of those divine supports which enable his people to endure the severest afflictions to which he calls them. Perhaps some persons who acknowledge our Lord's true character, may, upon that ground, think his agonies less insupportable, since he was not a mere man, but God in the human nature. It was indeed the dignity of his person that gave influence and efficacy to all that he did and suffered for sinners. It is likewise true that the weight laid upon him was more than any mere creature could sustain. I would speak with reverence and reserve upon a point which is too high for our weak minds fully to comprehend; but in whatever way the nature of man, which he assumed, was upheld by his eternal power and Godhead, we may venture to affirm that he derived no sensible comfort from it. For we have his own testimony, that in this sense God had forsaken him. The divine nature could neither bleed nor suffer. He was truly and properly a man; and as a man he suffered, and he suffered alone.

Many of his servants have rejoiced while they were tormented, because God overbalanced all they felt with the light of his countenance; but the Saviour himself, deprived of this light, experienced, to the uttermost, all that sin deserved, that was not inconsistent with the perfection of his character. My text expresses, so far as human words and ideas can reach, his exquisite distress, when he bore our sins in his own body, upon the tree. Reproach broke his heart, and when he looked for pity and comfort, he found none.

I. Reproach hath broken my heart.—We must not confine our thoughts here to the reproach of his enemies. The passage in the Messiah expresses it agreeably to the version of the Psalms used in our liturgy, *Thy rebuke*. Though he knew no sin, he was made sin for us. He was accounted and treated as a sinner. Now a sinner is deservedly the greatest object of contempt in the universe, and indeed the only object of deserved contempt. Thus he incurred the reproach of the law and justice of God. The Holy Father, viewing the Son of his love in this light, as charged with the sins of his people, forsook him. God infinitely hates sin and will have no fellowship with it; and of this he gave the most awful proof, by forsaking his beloved Son, when he took upon him to answer for the sins of men. Then the sword of the Almighty awoke against him, and he spared him not, Zech. xiii. 7.

This rebuke broke his heart. Let broken-hearted sinners look by faith upon a broken-hearted Saviour. The phrase denotes woe and dejection inconceivable, with a failure of all resource. Anything may be borne while the spirit, the heart remains firm, but if the heart itself be broken, who can endure. “A wounded spirit who can bear?” Proverbs, xviii. 14.

It is not therefore surprising, that he says, “I am full of heaviness.” In the evangelists we read, that “he began to be sore amazed and very heavy” (Mat. xxvi. 37, 38; Mark xiv. 33); and he said to his disciples, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death.” The most emphatical words are used to describe his sensation of the bitter conflict of his soul in the garden of Gethsemane, when as yet the hand of man had not touched him. He began to be amazed or astonished. [The Greek word] properly signifies, to be struck with terror and surprise by some supernatural power, such as Belshazzar felt when he suddenly saw the handwriting against him upon the wall (Dan. v. 6); and to be very heavy, sated with grief, full, so as to be incapable of more. Some critics explain the word, as importing such an oppression of mind as quite unfits a person for converse or society. (Compare Job xxx. 29.) He said, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful,”—surrounded, encompassed with sorrows. It is added, he was in an agony (Luke xxii. 44),—a consternation of mind, such as arises from the prospect of some impending, unavoidable evil, like the suspense of mariners upon the point of shipwreck, who tremble equally at the view of the raging waves behind them, and the rocky shore before their eyes, on which they expect in

a few moments to be dashed. The evils he was to bear and to expiate were now collecting to a point, and formed a dark tremendous storm, just ready to break upon his devoted head, and the prospect filled his soul with unutterable horror, so that his sweat was, as it were, great drops of blood falling down to the ground. Many have sweat under extremity of pain or terror, but his agonies, and the effect of them, were peculiar to himself: His sweat was blood.

This is not a subject for declamation. It rather becomes us to adore in humble silence the manifestation of the goodness and severity of God (Rom. xi. 22) in the Redeemer's sufferings, than to indulge conjecture and the flights of imagination. What is expressly revealed we may assert, contemplate, and admire. His soul was made an offering for sin, Isa. liii. 10. We know but little of the extreme malignity of sin, because we have but faint views of the majesty, holiness, and goodness of God, against whom it is committed. Yet a single sin, if clothed with all its aggravations, and the guilt of it brought home with power to the heart, is sufficient to make the sinner a terror to himself. Adam had sinned but once when he lost all comfort and confidence in God, and sought to hide himself. We have but slight thoughts of the extent of sin. Not only positive disobedience, but want of conformity to the law of God, is sinful. Every rising thought which does not comport with that reverence, dependence, and love which is due to God from creatures constituted, furnished, and indebted as we are, is sinful. The sins of one person in thought, word, and deed, sins of omission and commission, are innumerable. What then is contained in the collective idea, in what the scripture calls the sin of the world? What then must be the atonement, the consideration on the account of which the great God is no less righteous than merciful, in forgiving the sins, which his inviolable truth, and the honour of his government, engage him to punish. And they are punished, though forgiven. They were charged upon Jesus; they exposed him to a rebuke which broke his heart. They filled him with heaviness. When, therefore, we are assured that the justice of God is satisfied, with respect to every sinner of the race of mankind, who, in obedience to the divine command, makes the sufferings of the Saviour his plea for pardon, and trusts in him for salvation, and that upon this one ground they are freed from all condemnation, and accepted as children; when we are told that the glory of the divine perfections is displayed in the highest, by this method of saving millions who deserved to perish, we safely infer the greatness of the cause from the greatness of the effect. The sufferings of Christ, which free a multitude of sinners from the guilt of innumerable sins, must have been inconceivably great indeed!

II. Under this accumulated distress, though his will was perfectly submissive to the will of God, and his determination fixed to endure all that the case required; yet as he was truly a man, he felt like a man. His fortitude was very different from a stoical hardness of spirit. All the affections of pure humanity, whatever does not

imply sin, such as impatience under suffering, and an undue, premature desire of deliverance, operated in him, as they might do in one of us. It was no impeachment of his innocence, or of his willingness, that he wished, if it were possible, for some relief or alleviation of his misery. He looked, as we do when we are in heaviness, for some to have pity on him, and to comfort him, but there was none. Though the pity of our friends is often ineffectual, and can afford us no real assistance, yet it gives a little relief to have those about us to whom we can open our minds, who will sympathize with us, and compassionately attend to our complaints, if they can do no more. And to be neglected and forsaken in extremity, especially by those who have professed great friendship, or are under great obligations to us, will be felt as an aggravation of the most distressing case that can be imagined. But thus it was with Messiah. He had to complain, not only of the cruelty of his enemies, but of the insensibility and inconstancy of those who had professed the most cordial attachment to him. The impression thus made upon him as a man was such, that it is distinctly specified in the prophetic enumeration of the ingredients which composed the bitter cup of his sufferings.

He was not only apprehended by cruel men, but betrayed into their hands by one whom he had admitted into the number of his select apostles, who had been employed in his service, favoured with access to him in his more retired hours, and was present, with the rest, when he kept his last passover, and took his solemn and affectionate leave of them before he entered upon his passion. It was not an avowed enemy, but one of the twelve who dipped with him in the dish, that was guilty of this enormous ingratitude and treachery. How keen are our resentments, if those to whom we have shown great kindness are discovered to have studied our ruin while they wore the mask of friendship? Though Messiah was incapable of any sinful perturbation of mind, he was very capable of being painfully affected by the conduct of Judas: he had reason to look for pity from him, but he found none.

When he entered the garden of Gethsemane, he commanded, may I not say, he intreated, his disciples to tarry there and watch with him. And to engage their utmost attention, he spoke plainly to them of his distress, saying, "My soul is exceeding sorrowful even unto death." Yet when he returned unto them, the first, the second, yea, the third time, he found them sleeping. How tender, yet how forcible was his expostulation! "Could ye not watch one hour?" Matth. xxvii. 40. What! could they know that their Lord was in an agony, wrestling with strong cries and tears, and yet sleep! as regardless of his sorrows as of their own approaching danger! Were our dearest friends to show themselves equally insensible when we were in extreme anguish, would not their indifference wound our spirits? He also was a man; and we may conceive it some addition to his grief, that when he looked to them for pity and comfort, he found none.

When he was apprehended, notwithstanding their former protestation of zeal and love, they all forsook him and fled, Matt. xxvi. 56. They sought their own safety, and left him in the hands of his enemies. The apostle Paul was thus deserted, and his expressions intimate that he felt it. "At my first answer, no man stood by me, all men forsook me," 2 Tim. iv. 16. He had imbibed likewise the spirit of his master, and prayed that it might not be laid to their charge. And though the Lord Jesus pitied and excused the weakness of his disciples, and permitted them to take care of themselves, it was in them an instance how little he could depend upon those who were under the strongest obligations to him.

But Peter followed his Lord to the hall of the High Priest, and there saw him, with his own eyes, insulted, arraigned, and unjustly condemned. Might he not expect that Peter, the most active and earnest of all his followers, would have pitied him, at least at such a time. Alas! instead of pitying him, Peter denied him; he denied, with oaths and imprecations, that he had any knowledge of him, whom he had seen transfigured upon the mount, and agonizing in the garden. We read, that the Lord turned and looked upon Peter, Luke xxiv. 61. Who can conceive the energy of that look? It was full of meaning, and Peter well understood it. Surely, though a look of tenderness and compassion, it conveyed the expostulation of an injured benefactor, no less forcibly, than if all who were present had heard him say, "Peter, is this the pity I am to expect from thee?"

When he was nailed to the cross, he was surrounded only by enemies. These, as we have seen, far from pitying, or attempting to comfort him, derided and mocked him. How have some of us felt for our friends in their dying hours, though we have seen every possible attention paid to them, and everything provided and done for them that could administer to their relief and comfort! But they who have the faith which realizes unseen things, have beheld their best Friend expiring in tortures, and insulted by his murderers in his last moments.

But had all his disciples been near him, and had all his enemies been his friends, still, in his situation, he would have been alone. The loss of the light of God's countenance will, to the soul that has enjoyed it, create a universal solitude, and render every earthly good tasteless, in proportion as that soul is united to him in love; and still more, if there be superadded a sense of his displeasure. They who have never tasted that the Lord is good, not having known the difference, can have no conception of this subject. Their minds are at present occupied with earthly things; and while they are thus engaged with trifles, they cannot believe, though they are repeatedly told it, that to an immortal spirit, a separation from the favour of God involves in it the very essence of misery. But should death surprise them in their sins, tear them from all that they have seen and loved, and plunge them into an unknown, unchangeable world, then (alas! too late!) they will be sensible of their

immense, irreparable loss, in being cut off from the fountain of life and comfort. A suspension of this divine presence, with an awful sense and feeling of what those for whom he made himself responsible deserved, was the most dreadful part of the Redeemer's sufferings. He was perfectly united to the will and love of his heavenly Father, and, by the perfect holiness of his nature, incapable of tasting satisfaction in anything else, if his presence were withdrawn. But when he endured the curse of the law for us, he looked to God for pity and comfort, but he found none.

In this glass we are to contemplate the demerit of sin. But there are some sufferings due to the impenitent sinner, of which Messiah was not capable. I mean the consciousness of personal guilt, the gnawings of a remorseful conscience, and the rage of despair. If we add the idea of eternity to the whole, we may form some faint judgment of what they are delivered from who believe in him, and what misery awaits those who presume to reject him. Awful thought! to reject the only Saviour. If they refuse his mediation, they must answer in their own persons. Then they will find no pity, no comforter! For who, or what, can comfort, when the Lord God Omnipotent arises to punish? What will your pleasures, your wealth, or friends, do for you, when the hand of the Lord shall touch you to the quick? What smile can you expect will support you against the terror of his frown?

Should any of you hear the Messiah performed again, then and there, if not before, may God impress upon your heart the sense of this passage. Then you will understand, that the sufferings of the Son of God are by no means a proper subject for the amusement of a vacant hour.