

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 XXIII.

NO SORROW LIKE MESSIAH'S SORROW.

Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? Behold, and see, if there be any sorrow like unto cry Sorrow! LAMENTATIONS, i. 12.

ALTHOUGH the scriptures of the Old Testament, the law of Moses, the psalms, and the prophecies (Luke xxiv. 44), bear a harmonious testimony to Messiah, it is not necessary to suppose, that every single passage has an immediate and direct relation to him. A method of exposition has frequently obtained, of a fanciful and allegorical cast, under the pretext of spiritualizing the word of God. Ingenious men, and sometimes men not very ingenious, have endeavoured to discover types and mysteries in the plainest historical parts, where we have no sufficient evidence that the Holy Spirit intended to teach them. And upon very slight grounds a proof has been attempted of the great doctrines of the gospel, which may be proved, much more safely and solidly, from the passages of scripture in which they are plainly and expressly revealed. But by taking this course, instead of throwing real light upon the places they have in this manner attempted to explain, they have perplexed their hearers and readers, and led them to question, whether there be any fixed and determinate sense of scripture that may be fully depended upon. It is true, when we have the authority of an inspired expositor to lead us, we may follow him without fear; but this will not warrant us to strike out a path for ourselves, and trust to our conjectures, where we have not such an infallible guide. The epistle to the Hebrews is a key to explain to us many passages in a higher sense than perhaps we should have otherwise understood them. But it is best for us to keep within safe bounds, and to propose our own sentiments, when not supported by New Testament authority, with great modesty, lest we should incur the censure of being wise above what is written. I may, without scruple, affirm, that the history of Sarah and Hagar is an allegory referring to the two covenants, because the apostle Paul (Gal. iv. 24) has affirmed it before me; but if I attempted to spiritualize the history of Leah and Rachel likewise, you would not be bound to believe me without proof. I may preach the gospel of Christ from a text which mentions the manna or the brazen serpent (John iii. 14; vi. 31, 35), because our Lord has expounded these things as typical of himself: but I must not be confident that every resemblance which I think I can trace is the true sense of the place; because I may imagine many resemblances and types which the scripture does not authorize.

There is, however, a useful way of preaching, by accommodation, that is, when the literal sense is first clearly stated, to apply the passage, not directly to prove a doctrine as if really contained in it, but only to illustrate the doctrine expressly taught in other parts of the scripture. Thus, for instance, if the question

of Jonadab to Amnon (2 Sam. xiii. 9) were chosen for the subject of a discourse, “Why art thou, being a king’s son, lean from day to day?” the history of the context directly proves the malignity of sinful inordinate desire, and the misery of those who are under its dominion; that it poisons every situation in life, and renders the sinner incapable of satisfaction, though he were a king’s son. The form of the question might then lead to observe, That believers are king’s sons, to show what are the great privileges of their adoption; and to enquire how it comes to pass, that many persons so highly privileged are lean, that is uncomfortable, weak and languishing in their profession? These points might not improperly be introduced by way of accommodation, though they are not directly deducible from the literal sense of the question.

The text I have just read to you has led me into this digression. I find it in the series of the passages in the Messiah; but I am not sure, that in the literal sense it immediately refers to him. It is a pathetic exclamation, by which the prophet Jeremiah expresses his grief, or rather the grief of Jerusalem, when the sins of the people had given success to the Chaldean army, and the temple and the city were destroyed. Jerusalem is poetically considered as a woman, lately reigning a queen among the nations, but now a captive, dishonoured, spoiled, and sitting upon the ground. She intreats the commiseration of those who pass by, and asks, if there be any sorrow like unto her sorrow? Such a question has often been in the heart and in the mouth of the afflicted, especially in an hour of impatience. We are all, in our turns, disposed to think our own trials peculiarly heavy, and our own cases singular. But to them who ask this question, we may answer, Yes—there has been a sorrow greater than yours, greater than the sorrow of Jeremiah, or of Jerusalem. They who have heard of the sorrows of Jesus, will surely, upon the hearing of this question, be reminded of him, whether it was the intention of the prophet to personate him or not. If we conceive of him hanging upon the cross, and speaking in this language to us, “Was ever any sorrow like my sorrow?” must not we reply with admiration and gratitude, “No, Lord, never was love, never was grief, like thine.”

The expostulation and the question are equally applicable to the sufferings of Messiah. The former indeed is not inserted in the Oratorio, but I am not willing to leave it out. The highest wonder ever exhibited to the world, to angels, and men, is the Son of God suffering and dying for sinners. Next to this, hardly anything is more astonishing to an enlightened mind—than the gross and stupid insensibility with which the sufferings of the Saviour are treated, and the indifference with which this wonderful event is regarded by creatures who are so nearly concerned in it. If they believe in him, they will be healed by his wounds, and live by his death. If they finally reject him, they must perish; and their guilt and misery will be greatly aggravated by what they have heard of him! But sin has so blinded our understandings and hardened our hearts, that we have naturally no feeling either for him or for ourselves.

I. Is the expostulation suited to any person here? Can I, with propriety, say to some who are now present, Has this subject been hitherto nothing to you? Then, surely, you have not heard of it before; and, therefore, now you do hear of it, you will, you must be affected. If you were to read in the common newspapers, that a benevolent and excellent person had fallen into the hands of murderers, who had put him to death in the most cruel manner, would it not be something to you? Could you avoid impressions of surprise, indignation, and grief? Surely, if this transaction were news to you, it would engross your thoughts. But alas! you have rather heard of it too often, till it has become to you as a worn-out tale. I am willing to take it for granted that you allow the fact. You believe that Jesus Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate, was condemned by the Jews, and crucified by the Romans. And is it possible this should be nothing to you? Is it too insignificant to engage or deserve your attention? And yet, perhaps, you have wept at a representation or a narrative which you knew was wholly founded in fiction. How strange! What! the sorrows of Jesus nothing to you! when you admit that he suffered for sinners, and will probably admit that you are a sinner. No longer then boast of your sensibility! your heart must be a heart of stone. Yet thus it is with too many; your tempers, your conduct, give evidence that hitherto the death of Jesus has been nothing to you. You would not have acted otherwise, at least you would not have acted worse, if you had never heard of his name. Were his sufferings anything to you, is it possible, that you would live in the practice of those sins, for which no atonement could suffice but his blood? Were you duly affected by the thought of his crucifixion, is it possible that you could crucify him afresh, and put him to open shame, by bearing the name of a Christian, and yet living in a course unsuitable to the spirit and precepts of his gospel? But if you are indifferent to his grief, is it nothing to you on your own account? What! is it nothing to you whether you are saved or perish; whether you are found at his right, or his left hand, in the great day of his appearance; or whether he shall then say to you, “Come, ye blessed, inherit the kingdom prepared for you;” or, “Depart, ye cursed, into everlasting fire?” Matth. xxvi. 34. 41. There is no medium, no alternative. If you refuse this, there remaineth no other sacrifice for sin. This lamentable indifference to the Redeemer’s sorrows, is a full proof of the baseness and wickedness of the human heart; and it is felt as such, when the Holy Spirit convinces of sin. Natural conscience may excite a painful conviction of the sinfulness of many actions. But, this stupid unbelief of the heart is, if I may so speak, the sin of sins, it is the root and source of every evil, and yet so congenial to our very frame as we are depraved creatures, that God alone can make the sinner feel it (John xvi. 9); and when he does feel it, the sense of it wounds and grieves him more than all his other sins.

II. With respect to the question, if we rightly understand what has been observed from the scripture-history, in the six preceding sermons, concerning the

particulars of his passion; we may answer without hesitation, Never was suffering, or sorrow, like that which Messiah endured in the day of the Lord's fierce anger. It is possible that history, which is little more than a detail of the cruelty and wickedness of mankind, may furnish us with instances of many persons who have suffered excruciating torments, and have even been mocked and insulted in their agonies: But,

1. Was there ever a character of his dignity and excellence treated in such a manner? Job considered his former state as a great aggravation of his sufferings. He enlarges upon the respect which had been shown him in his prosperity. "When I went out to the gate, through the city, the young men saw me and hid themselves, the aged arose and stood up. When the ear heard me, then it blessed me; and when the eye saw me, it gave witness to me," Job xxix. 8, 11. But afterwards, speaking of fools, of base men, of the vilest of the earth, he adds, "Now am I their song, yea, their by-word. They abhor me, and spare not to spit in my face. They mar my path, they set forward my calamity, they come upon me as a wide breaking in of waters," chap. xxx. 8-14. But Jesus was the Lord of glory. He whom all the angels of God worshipped, was buffeted and spit upon by the lowest rabble. If a great king was degraded from his throne, and exposed to the derision of slaves, this would be a small thing compared with the humiliation of him, who, in his own right, was King of kings, and Lord of lords.

2. Was there ever so innocent a sufferer? When Aaron lost his two sons, he held his peace, Lev. x. 3. A little before he had been guilty of making the golden calf. The remembrance of this offence composed his mind under his great trial. He saw that he deserved a still heavier punishment, and was silent. In like manner, David, when his rebellious son Absalom conspired against his life, was patient; he remembered the adultery and murder he had committed; and, though he mourned under his afflictions, he durst not complain. 2 Sam. xvi. 11. The malefactor upon the cross submitted to his sentence, because he was a malefactor, saying, "And we indeed justly," Luke xxiv. 41. It is thus with all who know themselves. Under their severest afflictions, they admit the propriety of the prophet's question, "Why should a living man complain?" Lam. iii. 39. And they acknowledge, that it is of the Lord's great mercy they are not utterly consumed. But Jesus was holy, harmless, and undefiled; he had fulfilled the whole law, and had done nothing amiss; yet he yielded himself as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth, Is. liii. 7.

3. Did ever any other sufferer experience in an equal degree the day of God's fierce anger? In the greatest of our sufferings, in those which bear the strongest marks of the Lord's displeasure, there is always some mitigation, some mixture of mercy. At the worst, we have still reason to acknowledge, that he hath not dealt with us after our sins, nor according to the full desert of our

iniquities, Psal. ciii. 10. If we are in pain, we do not feel every kind of pain at once, yet we can give no sufficient reason why we should not. If we are exercised with poverty and losses, yet something worth the keeping, and more than we can justly claim, is still left to us, at least our lives are spared, though forfeited by sin. If we are in distress of soul, tossed with tempest and not comforted, we are not quite out of the reach of hope. Even if sickness, pain, loss, and despair, should all overtake us in the same moment, all is still less than we deserve. Our proper desert is hell, an exclusion from God, and confinement with Satan and his angels, where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. Everything short of this is a mercy. But Jesus, though he had no sin of his own, bore the sins of many. His sufferings were indeed temporary, limited in their duration, but otherwise extreme. Witness the effects, his heaviness unto death, his consternation, his bloody sweat, his eclipse upon the cross, when deprived of that presence, which was his only, and his exceeding joy. On these accounts, no sorrow was like unto his sorrow!

The unknown sorrows of the Redeemer are a continual source of support and consolation to his believing people. In his sufferings they contemplate his atonement, his love, and his example, and they are animated by the bright and glorious issue. For he passed from death to life, from suffering to glory.

(1.) His atonement, apprehended by faith, delivers them from guilt and condemnation, gives them peace with God, and access to him with liberty as children, Rom. v. 1, 2. Being thus delivered from their heavy burden, and from the power of Satan, and having a way open for receiving supplies of strength, according to their day, they are prepared to take up their cross, and to follow him.

(2.) His love, in submitting to such sorrows for their sakes, attaches their hearts to him. Great is the power of love! It makes hard things easy, and bitter sweet. Some of us can tell, or rather we cannot easily tell how much we would cheerfully do, or bear, or forbear, for the sake of the person whom we dearly love. But this noblest principle of the soul never can exert itself with its full strength, till it is supremely fixed upon its proper object. The love of Christ has a constraining force indeed! 2 Cor. v. 14. It is stronger than death. It overcomes the world. And we thus love him because he first loved us; because he loved us and gave himself for us, 1 John iv. 19; Gal. ii. 20.

(3.) His example. The thought that he suffered for them, arms them with the like mind. They look to him and are enlightened. By his cross they are crucified to the world, and the world to them. They no longer court its favour, nor are afraid of its frown. They know what they must expect, if they will be his servants, by the treatment he met with; and they are content. He who endured the contradiction of sinners against himself for them, is worthy that they should suffer likewise for him. It is their desire, neither to provoke the opposition of men nor to dread it. They commit themselves to him, and are sure that he will not expose them to such sufferings as he endured for them. So, likewise, under

all the trials and afflictions which they endure more immediately from the hand of the Lord, a lively thought of his sorrows reconciles them to their own. Thus by his stripes they are healed, and are comforted by having fellowship with him in his sufferings.

(4.) Lastly, if more were necessary (and, sometimes, through remaining infirmity and surrounding temptation, every consideration is no more than necessary), they know that their Lord passed through sufferings to glory. And they know (for they have his own gracious promise) that if they suffer with him, they shall also reign with him, John xii. 26; Rom. viii. 18. They are sure that the sufferings of the present life are not worthy to be compared with the joy which will then be revealed; and that when Christ, who is their life, shall appear, they also shall appear with him in glory (Col. iii. 4); and therefore they are comforted in all their tribulation, and can say, "None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I may finish my course with joy," Acts xx. 24.