

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, 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.

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 WOOLNOTH,

LOMBARD STREET,

LONDON.

—————Ah!

Tantamne rem, tam negligenter, agere! TER.

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

SERMON XXIV.

MESSIAH'S INNOCENCE VINDICATED.

He was taken from prison and from judgment; and who shall declare his generation? For he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken. ISAIAH, liii. 8.

LET not plain Christians be stumbled, because there are difficulties in the prophetic parts of the scripture, and because translators and expositors sometimes explain them with some difference as to the sense. Whatever directly relates to our faith, practice, and comfort, may be plainly collected from innumerable passages, in which all the versions, and all sober expositors, are agreed. That there are some differences, will not appear strange, if we consider the antiquity of the Hebrew language, and that the Old Testament is the only book extant that was written during the time that it was the common language of the people. For this reason we meet with many words which occur but once; and others, which do not occur frequently, are evidently used in more than one sense. If we suppose that a time should come when the English language should be no longer spoken, and no more than a single volume in it be preserved, we may well conceive that posterity might differ as to the sense of many expressions, notwithstanding the assistances they might obtain by comparing the English with the French, Dutch, and other languages, which were in use at the same period. Such assistance we derive from the Chaldee, Syriac, Greek, and other ancient versions of the Old Testament, sufficient to confirm us in the true sense of the whole, and to throw light upon many passages otherwise dark and dubious; and yet there will remain a number of places, the sense of which the best critics have not been able to fix with certainty. Farther, the prophecies are usually expressed in the style of poetry, which, in all languages, is remote from the common forms of speaking. The grand evidence, to a humble mind, that the holy scripture was originally given by inspiration of God, and that the version of it which by his good providence we are favoured with is authentic, is the effect it has upon the heart and conscience when enlightened by the Holy Spirit. And without this internal, experimental evidence, the learned are no less at a loss than the vulgar.

An acquaintance with the Hebrew will perhaps suggest a meaning in this verse (the latter part only of which is taken into the Messiah) which may not readily occur to an English reader. But the purport of it is plainly expressed in many other passages. The text is not merely a repetition of what was spoken before concerning the Redeemer's sufferings; rather the declaration of what was to follow them begins here. It is the opening of a bright and glorious subject. He was taken, he was taken up, like Enoch and Elijah, from prison, and from judgment, and who can declare his generation? or (as the word properly signifies)

his age? Who can declare his state, the establishment and duration of his dignity, influence, and government? For though he was cut off, made an excision and a curse, from amongst men, it was not upon his own account, but for the transgression of my people, that he was smitten.

God was manifested in the flesh (1 Tim. iii. 16), and in the flesh he suffered as a malefactor. Undoubtedly the divine nature is incapable of suffering; but the human nature, which did suffer, was assumed by him who is over all, God, blessed for ever, Rom. ix. 5. But he was justified in the Spirit, and sufficient care was taken, that in his lowest humiliation, though he was condemned and reviled, his character should be vindicated. I shall therefore consider at present the testimonies given to his innocence. Though he was cut off from the land of the living, it was only as a substitute for others. He was stricken for the transgressions of his people.

1. The first attention, and which of itself is fully sufficient to establish this point, is that of Judas. He was one of the twelve apostles who attended our Lord's person, and who were admitted to a nearer and more frequent intercourse with him than the rest of his disciples. Though our Lord knew that his heart was corrupt, and that he would prove a traitor, he does not appear to have treated him with peculiar reserve, or to have kept him more at a distance than the other apostles; for when he told them, "One of you shall betray me," they had no particular suspicion of Judas. He therefore was well acquainted with the more retired hours of his Master's life. He had been often with him in Gethsemane before he went thither to betray him to his enemies. When he had acted this treacherous part, if he, who had been frequently present when Jesus conversed most freely in private with his select followers, had known anything amiss in his conduct, we may be sure he would gladly have disclosed it, for his own justification. Christian societies have usually been reviled and slandered by those who have apostatized from them; their mistakes, if they were justly chargeable with any, have been eagerly published and aggravated, and many things often laid to their charge which they knew not. But Judas, on the contrary, was compelled by his conscience, to return his ill-gotten gain to the chief priests and elders, and to confess, "I have sinned, in that I have betrayed the innocent blood," Matt. xxvii. 4. Considering the time of making this declaration, when he saw that he was already condemned, and the persons to whom he made it, even to those who had condemned him, it cannot be denied that he was an unsuspected and competent witness to his innocence. And the answer of the chief priests implied, that, though their malice could be satisfied with nothing less than the death of this innocent person, they were unable to contradict the traitor's testimony.

2. Though Pilate likewise condemned Messiah to death, to gratify the importunity of the Jews, he repeatedly declared his firm persuasion of his innocence; and he did it with great solemnity. "He took water and washed his hands

(publicly) before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person,” Matt. xxvii. 24. He laboured for his release, though the fear of man prevailed upon him at last, as it has upon many, to act in defiance of the light and conviction of his conscience. And from him we learn, that Herod (Luke xxiii. 15), notwithstanding he mocked him and set him at nought, considered the accusations of his enemies to be entirely groundless. And farther, when the Jews proposed such an alteration of the title affixed to his cross, as might imply, that the claims our Lord had made were unjust and criminal, Pilate utterly refused to comply with their demand.

3. The thief upon the cross, with his dying breath said, “This man hath done nothing amiss.” If his competency as a witness should be disputed, because it is probable he had known but little of him, I admit the objection. Be it so, that this malefactor had little personal knowledge of our Lord. Then his opinion of his innocence must have been founded upon public report; and, therefore, it seems, he spoke not for himself only; but his words may be taken as a proof, that the people at large, though they suffered themselves to be influenced by the chief priests, to demand his death, and to prefer Barabbas, a robber and a murderer, to him, were generally conscious that he had done nothing amiss. Many of those who now said, “Crucify him, Crucify him,” had, not long before, welcomed him with acclamations of praise, saying, “Hosannah to the son of David.” This inconsistency and inconstancy is not altogether surprising to those who are well acquainted with the weakness and wickedness of human nature in its present state; and who consider the effects which the misrepresentations and artifice of persons of great name, and in high office, have often produced in the minds of the ignorant and superstitious. Thus at Lystra, through the persuasion of the Jews, the apostle Paul was stoned and left for dead (Acts xiv. 12, 19), by the very people, who, a little before, could with difficulty be restrained from paying him divine honours.

4. Though the salvation of men, and the honour of the law of God required, that when Messiah undertook to make an atonement for our sins, he should be thus given up to the rage and cruelty of his enemies, suffer all the infamy due to the worst and vilest transgressors, and be deserted by God and man; yet his heavenly Father bore a signal and solemn testimony to his character. The frame of nature sympathized with her suffering Lord. The heavens were clothed with sackcloth; the sun withdrew his shining; the sanctuary was laid open, by the rending of the vail of the temple from the top to the bottom; the earth trembled greatly; the rocks were rent; the graves opened, and the dead arose. These events, in connection with what had passed before, extorted an acknowledgment of his innocence from the Roman centurion who was appointed to attend his execution.

Thus, it appears, that Judas, who betrayed him; the Jewish council, which could not find sufficient ground, even though they employed false and suborned

witnesses to pass sentence upon him; Herod, who derided him; Pilate, who condemned him; the malefactor who suffered with him; and the commander of the soldiers who crucified him, all combined in a declaration of his innocence: God himself confirming their word, by signs and wonders in heaven and upon earth.

It may seem quite unnecessary to prove the innocency of him, who, in his human nature, was absolutely perfect, and in whom the presence and fulness of God dwelt; and it is indeed unnecessary to those who believe in his name. It is, however, a pleasing contemplation to them, and has an important influence upon their faith and hope. In this they triumph, that he who knew no sin himself, was made sin, was treated as a sinner for them, that they might be made the righteousness of God in him. The High Priest of our profession needed not, as those who typified his office of old, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people; for he was perfectly holy, harmless, and undefiled. And had he not been a lamb without spot or blemish, he could not have been accepted on our behalf. It was the perfection of his voluntary obedience to the law of our nature, under which he submitted to be made, which, conjoined with the excellency of his character as the Son of God, made him meet, able, and worthy, to expiate our transgressions. By the one offering of himself, once offered, he has made an end of sin, brought in an everlasting righteousness, and having appeared with his own blood within the vail, in the presence of God for us, and ever living to make intercession for all who come unto God by him, he is proposed in the gospel as the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him. In him, all the seed of Israel shall be justified, and shall glory, Is. xli. 17, 25. In him the true Israel, the partakers of the faith of Abraham, shall be saved, saved to the uttermost, saved with an everlasting salvation; they shall not be ashamed, nor confounded, world without end.

But who that knows these things can sufficiently commiserate the fatal effects of that unbelief which blinds and hardens the hearts of multitudes! especially that more learned and informed, and therefore more inexcusable unbelief, which characterizes the modern patrons of scepticism. They read and admire ancient history. There is no old story so frivolous or improbable, but it is sufficient to engage their attention, and to exercise their acumen, if it be found in Herodotus or Livy. They spare no pains, they perplex themselves, and weary their readers with their attempts to decipher an ancient inscription, or to fix the date, or reconcile the circumstances of a supposed event, which, after all, perhaps never had place but in the imagination of the writer. Their implicit deference to such uncertain authorities as these, often verges upon the border of extreme credulity. The Bible is an ancient history likewise; and if it was only received upon the footing of the rest, as merely a human composition, the facts which it relates, and the manner in which they are related, the admirable simplicity of narration in some parts, the unrivalled sublimity of description in others; the justness and discrimination of characters; the views it unfolds of the

workings of the human heart, and the springs of action, so exactly conformable to experience and observation, might surely recommend it to their notice. And possibly, if it did claim no higher authority than a human composition, men who have any just pretensions to taste, would admire it no less than they now undervalue it. But because it does not flatter their pride, nor give indulgence to their corrupt propensities, they are afraid to study it, lest the internal marks of its divine original should force unwelcome convictions upon their minds. Therefore they remain willingly ignorant of its contents, or the knowledge they discover of it is so very superficial, that a well instructed child of ten years of age may smile at the mistakes of critics and philosophers. That such a book is extant, is undeniable. How can they account for its production? A view of what they actually have done, will warrant us to assert, that the wisest men of antiquity, neither would have written such a book if they could, nor were they able, had they been ever so willing. And yet we have as good evidence, that the New Testament was written by plain and unlearned men, as we have for any fact recorded in History. How could such men invent such a book? and how should they without seeming directly to design it, but incidentally as it were, represent, that persons of such various characters, who concurred in putting Jesus to death, should all equally concur in establishing the testimony of his innocence.

True Christians, when they suffer unjustly, may learn, from the example of their Lord, to suffer patiently. The apostle presses this argument upon servants (1 Pet. ii. 18, 20)— who in those days were chiefly bond servants, or slaves. He, therefore, evidently supposes, that the knowledge of the gospel was sufficient to qualify people in the lowest situations of human life, with a fortitude and magnanimity of spirit of which philosophy could scarcely reach the conception. In effect, to be much taken up with the interests of self, to live upon the breath of others, to be full of resentment for every injury, and watchful to retaliate it; these are the properties and tokens of a little and narrow mind. It requires no energy, no sacrifice, no resolution, to acquire such a disposition; for it is natural to us, and powerful and habitual in the weakest and least respectable characters. But to act uniformly as the servants of God, satisfied with his approbation, under the regulation of his will, and for his sake cheerfully to bear whatever hardships a compliance with duty may expose us to, enduring grief, suffering wrongfully, and acting in the spirit of benevolence and meekness, not only to the good, but also to the froward; this indicates a true nobleness of soul. And to this we are called by our profession: for thus Christ suffered. He did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth; yet he was reviled, but he reviled not again. He suffered, though innocent; but he threatened not. He was crucified by wicked men: but he prayed for them while they were nailing him to the cross. This was an eminent branch of the mind that was in Christ; and it ought to be a distinguishing feature in the character of his people. For, is the disciple above his Lord? or should the conduct of the disciple contradict that of his Lord? Undoubtedly, so

far as we are partakers in the doctrine of his sufferings, and have real fellowship with him in his death, we shall resemble him. If we say we abide in him, we ought to walk, even as he walked, 1 John ii. 6. But they, who, calling themselves Christians, are full of the spirit of self-justification, contention, and complaint, while they profess to believe in him, deny him by their works. The apostles Peter and John, deeply affected by their obligations to him, and by the exquisite pattern of meekness and tenderness which he had set before them, departed from the presence of the council, not swelling with anger, nor hanging down their heads with grief, but rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his sake, Acts v. 41. And he deserves no less from us than he did from them. It was for us, no less than for them, that he endured reproach, and was content to die as a malefactor, though he was innocent.