

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, DIS-
COURSES 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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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!
Tantanne rem, tam negligenter, agere!—TER.
Oh, that they were wise, that they understood this!—DEUT. xxxii. 29.

SERMON XXXV.

OPPOSITION TO MESSIAH RUINOUS.

Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron, thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. PSALM ii. 9.

THERE is a species of the sublime in writing, which seems peculiar to the scripture, and of which, properly, no subjects but those of divine revelation are capable. With us things inconsiderable in themselves are elevated by splendid images, which give them an apparent importance beyond what they can justly claim. Thus the poet, when describing a battle among bees, by a judicious selection of epithets and figures, excites in the minds of his readers the idea of two mighty armies contending for empire. But the works and ways of God are too great in themselves to admit of any heightening representation. We conceive more forcibly of small things by illustrations borrowed from those which are greater; but the scripture frequently illustrates great things, by contrasting them with those which in our estimation are trivial and feeble. One instance, out of many which might be mentioned, is that truly sublime passage of the prophet: "And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved, and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll; and all their host shall fall down as the leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a falling fig from the fig-tree," Isa. xxxiv. 4. The apostle, when favoured with a heavenly vision, introduces the same thought, almost in the same words: "And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig-tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind: and the heavens departed as a scroll when it is rolled together," Rev. vi. 13, 14. Such forms of expression are becoming the Majesty of the great God, before whom the difference between the great and the small in our judgment is annihilated. In his view, the earth, with all its inhabitants, are but as a drop which falls unnoticed from the bucket, or as the dust which cleaves to the balance, (Is. xl. 15), without affecting its equilibrium. At the same time, the simplicity of these illustrations, so well suited to confound the pride of the wise, is striking and obvious to the lowest capacities. If Homer or Virgil had been to describe the exertion and effect of the power of God, in subduing and punishing his enemies, they would probably have laboured for a simile sufficiently grand. But I much question if they would have thought of the image in my text, though none can be more expressive of utter irreparable ruin, or of the ease with which it is accomplished: He shall dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

The series of the passages we have lately considered is very regular and beautiful. Messiah ascended on high, and received gifts for men. The first and immediate consequence of his exaltation in our nature, is the publication of the gospel. Then follows the happy and beneficial influence of the gospel on those who thankfully receive it. How beautiful are the feet of them that preach these glad tidings! The next passage secures and describes its extensive progress—the sound went forth into all the earth. The opposition awakened by it is then described, First, as unreasonable—Why do the Heathen rage? Secondly, as ineffectual—the Lord laughs at his opposers; he sits upon his immoveable throne, and derides their attempts. Thirdly, the final issue of their mad resistance, their confusion and ruin, is the subject of the verse I have read, which prepares for the close of the second part of the Oratorio. His enemies shall perish, his kingdom shall be established and consummated. And then all holy intelligent beings shall join in a song of triumph, “Hallelujah, for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth.”

The two expressions, of breaking with a rod of iron, and dashing in pieces, suggest nearly the same idea. But as elsewhere he is said to rule his enemies with a rod of iron (Rev. xix. 15), I shall avail myself of this variation, in order to give you a more complete view of the dreadful state of those who oppose Messiah and his kingdom. He rules them at present with a rod of iron, and hereafter he will dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel. Let us therefore consider

I. How the Lord Messiah rules over impenitent and obstinate sinners in the present life. They attempt (in vain) to withdraw from his subjection; they oppose his holy will; they refuse to submit to his golden sceptre: He will therefore rule them with a rod of iron. For though they boast of their liberty, and presume to say, Who is Lord over us? (Psal. xii. 4) yet in the thing wherein they speak proudly, he is above them (Exod. x viii. 11). They cannot hide themselves from his notice, nor avoid the intimations of his displeasure.

1. One branch of his iron rule over them, consists in that certain and inseparable connection which he has established between sin and misery. The fruit of righteousness is peace, James iii. 18. They who live in the fear of the Lord, and yield a willing obedience to his word, not only possess peace of conscience, and a hope which can look with comfort beyond the grave, but are thereby preserved from innumerable evils, into which they who attempt to cast off his yoke unavoidably plunge themselves. On the contrary, the way of transgressors is hard, Prov. xiii. 15. It is hard in itself, if we set aside for a moment the consideration of the dreadful end to which it leads. Could you see what passes within the breast of a man who disdains to be governed by the rule of God’s word, you would see his heart torn to pieces by the clamorous, insatiable demands of the various, violent, inconsistent appetites and passions, which, like so many wild beasts, are continually preying upon him.

Not one of them can be fully gratified, much less all, for many of them are diametrically opposite to each other. The boilings of anger, the gnawings of envy, the thirst of covetousness, the anxieties attendant on pride and ambition, must make the mind that is subject to them miserable. There is no peace to the wicked; there can be none. Farther, their evil tempers and irregular desires produce outward and visible effects, which publicly and manifestly prove, that the service of sin is a hard drudgery, and that whatever pleasure it may seem to promise, its pay is misery and pain. “Who hath woe, contentions, and wounds without cause?” (Proverbs, xxiii. 29.) The drunkard. Lewdness and drunkenness are high roads, if I may so speak, leading to infamy, disease, penury, and death. Such persons do not live out half the days which their constitutions might have afforded, if they had not sold themselves to do wickedly. Again, look into their houses. Where the Lord does not dwell, peace will not inhabit. How frequently may we observe, in their family-connections, discord and enmity between man and wife, unkind parents, disobedient children, tyrannical masters, and treacherous servants? Thus they live, hateful in themselves, and hating one another, Tit. iii. 2. If they have what the world accounts prosperity, their hard master Satan so works upon their evil dispositions, that they can derive no real comfort from it. Every day, almost every hour, puts some new bitterness into their cup. And in trouble they have no resource: having no access to God, no promise to support them, no relief from him against their anxieties and fears, they either sink down in sullen, comfortless despondency, or in a spirit of wild rebellion, blaspheme him because of their plagues, Rev. xvi. 21. In society they are dreaded and avoided by the sober and serious, and can only associate with such as themselves. There indeed, they will pretend to be happy; they carouse, and make a noise, and assist each other to banish reflection; yet frequently the drink, or the devil, breaks their intimacies, and stirs them up to quarrels, broils, and mischief. Such is a life of sin. The Lord rules them with a rod of iron. They renounce his fear, and he refuses them his blessing. Nothing more is necessary to render them miserable than to leave them to themselves.

2. He rules them with a rod of iron by his power over conscience. They may boast and laugh, but we know the gall and bitterness of their state; for we, likewise, were in it, until the Lord delivered us. Let them say what they will, we are sure that there are seasons, when, like him whom they serve, they believe and tremble, James ii. 19. They cannot always be in company, they cannot always be intoxicated; though this is the very reason why many intoxicate themselves so often, because they cannot bear their own thoughts when sober. They are then a burden and a terror to themselves. They feel the iron rod. How awful are the thoughts which sometimes awaken them, or keep them awake, in the silent hours of the night! What terrors seize them in

sickness, or when they are compelled to think of death! What a death-warrant do they often receive in their souls, under the preaching of that word of God which fills his people with joy and peace! Many will not hear it. But why not? They will not, because they dare not. I am persuaded there are more than a few of the brave spirits of the present day, who would willingly change conditions with a dog, and be glad to part with their reason, if they could at the same time get rid of the horrors which hunt their consciences. Is there one such person here? Let me entreat you to stop and consider, before it be too late. There is yet forgiveness with God. Your case, though dangerous is not desperate, if you do not make it so yourself. I would direct your thoughts to Jesus. Look to him, and implore his mercy. His blood can cleanse from all sin. He is able to save to the uttermost.

It is possible some may affect to contradict the representation I have made, and be ready to say, "I find nothing of all this. I take a pleasure in my way. I have a healthy body, money at my command, and I can sleep soundly. I feel none of the qualms of conscience you speak of; and though the saints and good folks care as little for me as I do for them, yet I am very well and happy with such acquaintance as I like best. As to a hereafter, I do not think of it; but I am determined to live now." In answer to sentiments of this kind, which I am afraid are too common, I observe,

3. That the amazing hardness and blindness of heart to which some sinners are given up, is another, and the most terrible effect of that iron rod with which the Lord rules his enemies. Pharaoh could say as positively as you, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey him?" Exod. v. 2. But because, being often rebuked, he persisted in his obstinacy, the contest terminated in his destruction. If you are obstinate like him now, I believe you were not always so. You must have laboured hard, you must have resisted the light of truth, and have stifled many a conviction, before you could arrive to this pitch of obduracy. You have fought against the Holy Spirit; and woe unto you, if he be gone, gone for ever, and will strive with you no more. To be thus given up of God to a reprobate mind, is the heaviest judgment that a sinner can be visited with on this side of hell. I am at a loss what to say to a person thus disposed, and I hope there are none such present. But I would warn those, who, though they have sinned with a high hand, are not yet altogether past feeling, lest you fall into such a state of confirmed disobedience and unbelief. Take heed lest you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin, Heb. iii. 13. If under the light of the gospel you can go on in a course of wilful, wanton, deliberate wickedness, you are upon the very edge of the unpardonable sin, of that state from which it is impossible to renew you to repentance. If the Bible be, as you vainly wish it may prove, a cunningly-devised fable, you may trample upon it with impunity, and laugh on securely to the end of life.

But if it be true, remember you have been this day warned of the consequences of despising it. If you will perish, I am clear of your blood.

II. I proceed to consider the final issue of this unequal contest between the worms of the earth and their Maker. He will dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. Such a vessel may be curiously wrought, and appear beautiful to the eye, but it is frail, easily broken, and, when once broken to pieces, it is irreparable. It is therefore a fit emblem of mortal man in his best estate. We are fearfully and wonderfully made, Psal. cxxxix. 14. The texture of the human frame is admirable. The natural capacities of the mind of man, the powers of his understanding, will, and affections, the rapidity of imagination, the comprehension of memory, especially in some instances, are so many proofs, that considered as a creature of God, he is a noble creature; and though he is debased and degraded by sin, there are traces of his original excellence remaining, sufficient to denominate him in the words of the poet, "majestic though in ruins." But if you suppose him rich, powerful, wise, in the common sense of the words, he is brittle as a potter's vessel, and while possessed of every possible advantage, he is but like the grass or the flower of the field, which, in its most flourishing state, falls in a moment at the stroke of the scythe, and withers, and dies. A fever, a fall, a tile, a grain of sand, or the air that finds its way through a crevice, may be an overmatch for the strongest man, and bring him down hastily to the grave. By a small change in the brain, or some part of the nervous system, he who now prides himself in his intellectual abilities may soon become a lunatic or an idiot. Disease may quickly render the beauty loathsome, and the robust weak as infancy. There are earthen or china vessels, which might possibly endure for many ages, if carefully preserved from violence. But the seeds of decay and death are sown in our very frame. We are crushed before the moth, and moulder away untouched under the weight of time. How surely and inevitably, then, must they whom the Lord strikes with his iron rod, be shattered with the blow!

Communities and collective bodies of men are, in his hand, no less frail than individuals. The first-born throughout Egypt, and the vast army of Sennacherib, perished in a night. The Romans were the iron rod in his hand, wherewith he dashed the Jewish nation to pieces. Their fragments are scattered far and wide to this day, and who can gather them up? The Roman empire was likewise dashed to pieces in its turn; and such has been the end successively of many powers, and of many persons who have presumed to oppose his designs. For a while they were permitted to rage, and plot, and strive; but at length they stumbled and fell, and their memory is perished.

But it is proper to bring the consideration nearer home. I have been informed, that the music to which this passage is set, is so well adapted to the idea that it expresses, as in a manner to startle those who hear it. They who live in sinful habits, regardless of the gospel, would be startled, indeed, if

they were duly sensible how directly the words apply to their own situation, and that the psalmist describes the manner in which God will treat them, if they continue impenitent. If we could see all that passes upon dying beds, we should often see the false peace and vain hopes of sinners dashed to pieces when eternity is opening upon their view. We shall certainly see the solemnity of the great day: "For we must all appear" not only as spectators, but as parties nearly interested in the proceedings, "before the judgment-seat of Christ." "Behold, he cometh in the clouds, and every eye shall see him, and they also who pierced him!" He will descend with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God, and before him shall be gathered all nations. Where then shall the sinner and the ungodly appear? What will then become of those who despise, and those who abuse the gospel of the grace of God? The libertine, the infidel, the apostate, the hypocrite, the profane scoffer, and the false professor, how will they stand, or whither will they flee, when the great Judge shall sit upon his awful throne, and the books shall be opened, and every secret thing shall be disclosed! Alas for them that are full, and that laugh now, for then they shall pine and mourn, Luke vi. 25. Then their cavils will be silenced, their guilt, with all its aggravations, be charged home upon them, and no plea, no advocate be found. Can their hearts endure, or their hands be strong, when he shall speak to them in his wrath, and say, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels?"

But let them who love his name rejoice. You have fled for refuge to the hope set before you. To you his appearance will be delightful, and his voice welcome. You shall not be ashamed. This awful God is yours. He will then own and accept you before assembled worlds, and will say, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you." Then the days of your mourning shall be ended, and your sun shall go down no more, Matt. xxv. 34. Is. lx. 20.