

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.

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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 XLIV.

TRIUMPH OVER DEATH AND THE GRAVE.

O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Cor. xv. 55–57.

The Christian soldier may, with the greatest propriety, be said to war a good warfare, 1 Tim. i. 18. He is engaged in a good cause; he fights under the eye of the Captain of his salvation. Though he be weak in himself, and though his enemies are many and mighty, he may do that which in other soldiers would be presumption, and has often been the cause of a defeat; he may triumph while he is in the heat of battle, and assure himself of victory before the conflict is actually decided; for the Lord, his great Commander, fights for him, goes before him, and treads his enemies under his feet. Such a persuasion, when solidly grounded upon the promises and engagement of a faithful unchangeable God, is sufficient, it should seem, to make a coward bold. True Christians are not cowards; yet, when they compare themselves with their adversaries, they see much reason for fear and suspicion on their own parts; but when they look to their Saviour, they are enlightened, strengthened, and comforted. They consider who he is, what he has done; that the battle is not so much theirs as his; that he is their strength and their shield, and that his honour is concerned in the event of the war. Thus out of weakness they are made strong; and however pressed and opposed, they can say, “Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors, through him that loved us!” Rom. viii. 37. The whole power of the opposition against them is summed up in the words Sin and Death: but these enemies are already weakened and disarmed. It is sin that furnished death with his sting; a sting sharpened and strengthened by the law. But Jesus, by his obedience unto death, has made an end of sin, and has so fulfilled and satisfied the law on their behalf, that death is deprived of its sting, and can no longer hurt them. They may therefore meet it with confidence, and say, “Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

We have here two unspeakably different views to take of the same subject,—Death armed with its formidable sting; and Death rendered harmless, and its aspect softened, by the removal of the sting.

I. The first is a very awful subject: I entreat your attention. I am not now about to speak upon a point of speculation. It is a personal, a home concern to us all. For we must all die. But should any of you feel not only the stroke, but the sting of death when you leave this world, it were better for you that you had never been born.

The love of life, and consequently a reluctance to that dissolution of the intimate union between soul and body, which we call death, seems natural to man. But, if there was no hereafter, no state of judgment and retribution to be expected; if there was no consciousness of guilt, no foreboding of

consequences upon the mind; if we only considered death as inevitable, and had no apprehensions beyond it; death would be divested of its principal terrors. We see that when conscience is stupefied, or when the mind is poisoned with infidelity, many people, notwithstanding the natural love of life, are so disgusted with its disappointments, that a fit of impatience, or the dread of contempt, often prevails on them to rush upon death by an act of their own will; or to hazard it in a duel, rather than be suspected of wanting what they account spirit. But death has a sting, though they perceive it not till they feel it, till they are stung by it past recovery. .

But usually, and where the heart is not quite hardened, men are unwilling and afraid to die. They have some apprehension of the sting. Death can sting at a distance. How often and how greatly does the fear of death poison and embitter all the comforts of life, even in the time of health! Perhaps some of you well know this to be true. But in health people can in some measure run away from themselves, if I may so speak. They fly to business, company, and amusements, to hide themselves from their own reflections. Their fears are transient, occasional and partial; they would tremble indeed, if they knew all; or if they were steadfastly and deliberately to contemplate what they do know. How sin is the sting of death, is best discovered when conscience is alarmed in a time of sickness; when the things of the world can no longer amuse, and death is approaching with hasty strides. These scenes are mostly kept secret; and very often they are not understood by those who are spectators of them. Perhaps the unhappy terrified sinner is considered as delirious, because the sting of death in his conscience extorts from him such confessions and complaints as he never made before. What was once slighted as a fable, is now seen and felt as a reality. Such cases, I am afraid, are more frequent than we are in general aware of. But they are suppressed, ascribed to the violence of the fever, and forgotten as soon as possible. Yet they do sometimes transpire. I believe there is no reason to doubt the truth of what we have heard, of one, who in the horrors of despair vainly offered his physicians many thousand pounds, to prolong his life but a single day. The relation is in print, of another, who pointing to the fire in his chamber, said, If he were only to lie twenty thousand years in such a fire, he should esteem it a mercy compared with what he felt, and with what he saw awaiting him. It is not always thus. Many persons die insensible as they lived, and can perhaps, trifle and jest in their last moments. But the scripture assures us, that when they who die in their sins breathe their last in this world, they open their eyes in the other world in torments. For the sting of death, the desert of sin, unless timely removed by faith in Jesus, will fill the soul with anguish for ever. It derives a strength, an efficacy, and a continuance from the law.

This law, which gives strength to sin and sharpens the sting of death, is the law of our creation, as connected with the penalty which God has annexed to the breach of it. Our relation to God, as we are his creatures, requires us, according to the very nature of things, supremely to love, serve,

trust, and obey him, who made us, and in whom we live, and breathe, and have our being, Acts xvii. 28. And our revolting from him, and living to ourselves in opposition to his will, is such an affront to his wisdom, power, authority, and goodness, as must necessarily involve misery in the very idea of it, if his perfections, the capacity of our souls, and our absolute dependence upon him, be attended to. And they must be attended to sooner or later. Though he keep long silence, and the sinner presumes upon his patience, and thinks him such a one as himself, he will at length reprove him (Ps. 1. 21), and set his sins in order before him, in contrast with the demands of his law. The nature, authority, extent, and sanction of this law, all combine to give efficacy to the sting of death.

1. The law, to which our tempers and conduct ought to be conformed, is not an arbitrary appointment; but necessarily results from our state as creatures, and the capacities and powers we have received from our Creator. It is therefore holy, wise, and good; indispensable, and unchangeable. To love God with all our heart and strength, to depend upon him, to conform to every intimation of his will, was the duty of man from the first moment of his existence; was the law of his nature, written originally in his heart. The republication of it, as it stands in the Bible, by precepts and prohibitions, would not have been necessary had he continued in that state of rectitude in which he was created. It became necessary after his fall, to restrain him from evil and to convince him of sin; but could not properly increase his primitive obligation to obedience.

2. We are bound to the observance of this law by the highest authority. It is the law of God our maker, preserver, and benefactor, who has every conceivable right to govern us. His eye is always upon us, and we are surrounded by his power, so that we can neither avoid his notice nor escape his hand. Men are usually tenacious of their authority; they seldom allow their dependants to dispute or disobey their commands with impunity. It is expected that a son should honour his father, and a servant his master, Mal. i. 6. And when men have power to execute the dictates of their pride, they frequently punish disobedience with death. But how will these haughty worms, who trample upon their fellow worms, and think they have a right to the most implicit obedience from their inferiors; how will they tremble, when they shall appear before God, who is no respecter of persons, to answer for their contempt of the authority of the Sovereign Lawgiver, who, alone, is able to save or to destroy? That we ought to obey God rather than man (Acts v. 29), will, perhaps, be allowed as a speculative truth; but whoever will uniformly make it the rule of his practice, must expect upon many occasions to be deemed a fool or a madman by the world around him. But sovereignty, majesty, authority, and power belong to God. He is the Governor of the universe, and his throne is established in righteousness. He is long-suffering, and waits to be gracious, but he will not forego his right. Sin is the sting of death indeed, when the authority of him against whom it was committed is perceived by the conscience.

3. The extent of the law adds to the strength by which sin acts as the sting of death. Human laws can only take cognisance of words and actions. But the law of God reaches to the thoughts and inward recesses of the heart. It condemns what is most specious and most approved amongst men, if not proceeding from a right intention, and directed to the right end, which can be no other than the will and glory of him who made us. It condemns the sinner not only for the evil which he has actually committed, but for every sinful purpose formed in his heart, and which was only rendered abortive for want of opportunity, Matth. v. 28. It likewise takes exact notice of every aggravation of sin, arising from circumstances, from the abuse of superior light and advantages, and from the long train of consequences, increasing in proportion to the influence which the rank, wealth, or extensive connections of the offender give to his example.

4. The sanction of the law, which thus strengthens the malignity of sin, is the very point, if I may so express myself, of the sting of death. This is the displeasure of the Almighty. His holy, inflexible love of order will exclude those who violate it from his favour. They must be miserable, unless they are reconciled and renewed by the grace of the gospel. They must be separated from him, and they cannot be happy without him. They are not so even in this world, which they love. How miserable then must they be, when, torn from all their attachments, pleasures, and possessions, having no longer any thing to divert them from a fixed attention to their true state, they shall be made keenly sensible of what is implied in that sentence, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire." We cannot now conceive what it will be to lose the only good which can satisfy a soul, to be shut out from God, whose favour is life, and in whose presence there is fulness of joy, and to be shut up where neither peace nor hope can enter. The images of fire unquenchable and a never-dying worm, are but faint emblems of that despair and remorse which will sting the sinful soul in a future state. This is the second death: this is eternal death; for the wicked, and all they who forget God, when thrust into hell, will for ever desire to die, and death will for ever flee from them, Rev. ix. 6.

II. Let us turn our thoughts to a more pleasing theme, and attempt to take a view of death as softened into a privilege by him who has brought life and immortality to light. Jesus died. His death was penal; he died for sin, though not for his own, and therefore suffered the penalty due to sin, the curse of the broken law. The torment and shame of his crucifixion were preceded and accompanied by unknown agonies and conflicts, which caused him to sweat blood, and to utter strong cries and groans. Death stung him to the heart; but (as it is said of the enraged bee) he lost his sting. The law having been honoured, and sin expiated, by the obedience and sufferings of the Son of God for us, and in our nature, death has no longer power to sting those who believe in him. They do not properly die, they fall asleep in Jesus, Acts vii. 60; 1 Thessalonians iv. 15. To them this last ene-

my acts a friendly part. He is sent to put an end to all their sorrows, and to introduce them into a state of endless life and joy.

1. Dying believers can sing this song before their departure out of the world. We expect it, when we are called to attend them in their last hours; and if their illness leaves them in possession of their faculties and speech, we are seldom disappointed. Yet I believe a full knowledge of this subject cannot be collected from what we observe of others, or hear from them, when they are near death. We must be in similar circumstances ourselves, before we can see as they see, or possess the ideas which they endeavour to describe, and which seem too great for the language of mortals to convey.

We know, by the evidence of undeniable testimony, that many faithful servants of God, when called to suffer for his sake, have not only been supported, but comforted, and enabled to rejoice, under the severest tortures, and even in the midst of the flames. We suppose, I think with reason, that such communications of light and power as raise a person, in such situations, above the ordinary feelings of humanity, must, either in kind or degree, be superior to what is usually enjoyed by Christians in the smoother walks of prosperity and outward peace. God, who is all-sufficient, and always near, has promised to give his people strength according to their day, and in the time of trouble they are not disappointed. A measure of the like extraordinary discoveries and supports is often vouchsafed to dying believers, and thus the gloom which might otherwise hang over their dying hours, is dispelled; and while they contemplate the approach of death, a new world opens upon them. Even while they are yet upon earth, they stand upon the threshold of heaven. It seems, in many cases, as if the weakness of the bodily frame gave occasion to the awakening of some faculty, till then dormant in the soul, by which invisibles are not only believed, but seen, and unutterables are heard and understood.

The soul's dark cottage, tattered and decayed,
Lets in new light through chinks.——

Instances are frequent of those who are thus blessed when they die in the Lord; and it does not appear that old age, or great knowledge, or long experience, gives any considerable advantage in a dying hour; for when the heart is truly humbled for sin, and the hope solidly fixed upon the Saviour, persons of weak capacities and small attainments, yea, novices, and children, are enabled to meet death with equal fortitude and triumph. And often the present comforts they feel, and their lively expectations of approaching glory, inspire them with a dignity of sentiment and expression far beyond what could be expected from them; and perhaps their deportment upon the whole is no less animating and encouraging, than that of the most established and best informed believers. Thus, out of the mouths of babes and sucklings the Lord ordains strength, and perfects his praise, Ps. viii. 2. In a few hours, under the influence of his immediate teaching, they often learn

more of the certainty and importance of divine things than can be derived from the ordinary methods of instruction in the course of many years. In the midst of agonies and outward distress, we hear them with admiration declare that they are truly happy, and that they never knew pleasure in their happiest days of health equal to what they enjoy when flesh and heart are fainting. For death has lost its sting as to them, and while they are able to speak, they continue ascribing praise to him, who has given them the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Every word in this doxology is emphatical.

1st. Thanks be to God.—This blessedness is all his work. The means are of his gracious appointment. The application is by his gracious power. He gave his Son for them, he sent his gospel to them. It was the agency of his Spirit that made them a willing people. The word of promise, which is the ground of their hope, was of his gratuitous providing, and it was he who constrained and enabled them to trust in it, Ps. cxix. 49.

2d. Who giveth us the victory.—This is victory indeed; for it is over the last enemy; and after the last enemy is vanquished, there can be no more conflicts. In this sense, believers are more than conquerors. In other wars, they who have conquered once and again, may have been finally defeated, or they may have died (like our long-lamented general Wolfe) upon the field of battle, and have left the fruits of their victory to be enjoyed by others. But the Christian soldier, though he may occasionally be a loser in a skirmish, he is sure to conquer in the last great deciding battle; and when to an eye of sense, he seems to fall, he is instantly translated to receive the plaudit of his Commander, and the crown of life which he has prepared for them that love him.

3d, This victory is through our Lord Jesus Christ.—They gained it not by their own sword, neither was it their own arm that saved them, Ps. xlv. 3. He died to deliver them, who would otherwise, through fear of death, have been always subject to bondage. And it is he who teaches their hands to war, and their fingers to fight, and covers their heads in the day of battle. Therefore they gladly say, “Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name, be the glory and the praise,” Ps. cxv. 1. And this consideration enhances their pleasure; for because they love him above all, they rejoice not only in the victory they obtain, but in the thought that they are indebted to him for it. For were it possible there could be several methods of salvation, and they were left to their own choice, they would, most gladly and deliberately, choose that method which should bring them under the greatest obligations to him.

2. This triumphant song will be sung to the highest advantage, when the whole body of the redeemed shall be collected together to sing it with one heart and voice at the great resurrection-day. Lot was undoubtedly thankful, when he was snatched from the impending destruction of Sodom. Yet his lingering (Gen. xix. 16) showed, that he had but an imperfect sense of the greatness of the mercy afforded him. His feelings were probably stronger

afterwards, when he stood in safety upon the mountain, and actually saw the smoke rising, like the smoke of a furnace, from the place where he had lately dwelt. At present we have but very faint ideas of the misery from which we are delivered, of the happiness reserved in heaven for us; or of the sufferings of the Redeemer; but if we attain to the heavenly Zion, and see from thence the smoke of that bottomless pit, which might justly have been our everlasting abode, we shall then more fully understand what we are delivered from, the means of our deliverance, and the riches of the inheritance of the saints in light. And then we shall sing in more exalted strains than we can at present even conceive of, "Thanks be to God, who hath given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."