

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!

Tantanne rem, tam negligenter, agere ! TER.

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

SERMON XLV.

DIVINE SUPPORT AND PROTECTION.

What shall we say then to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?

ROM. viii 31.

THE passions of joy or grief, of admiration or gratitude, are moderate, when we are able to find words which fully describe their emotions. When they rise very high, language is too faint to express them; and the person is either lost in silence, or feels something which, after his most laboured efforts, is too big for utterance. We may often observe the apostle Paul under this difficulty, when attempting to excite in others such sensations as filled his own heart, while contemplating the glories and blessings of the gospel. Little verbal critics, who are not animated by his fervour, are incapable of entering into the spirit of his writings. They coldly examine them by the strictness of grammatical rules, and think themselves warranted to charge him with solecisms, and improprieties of speech. For it must be allowed, that he sometimes departs from the usual forms of expression; invents new words, or at least compounds words for his own use, and heaps one hyperbole upon another. But there is a beautiful energy in his manner far superior to the frigid exactness of grammarians, though the taste of a mere grammarian is unable to admire or relish it. When he is stating the advantage of being with Christ, as beyond any thing that can be enjoyed in the present life, he is not content with saying, as his expression is rendered in our version, "It is far better," Phil. i. 23. In the Greek, another word of comparison is added, which, if our language would bear the literal translation, would be, "Far more better," or "Much more better." And when he would describe the low opinion he had of himself, great as his attainments were in our view, he thinks it not sufficient to style himself "The least of all saints," but "less than the least," Eph. iii. 8. Such phrases do not imply that he was ignorant of the rules of good writing, but they strongly intimate the fulness of his heart. In the course of the chapter before us, having taken a rapid survey of the work of grace, carried on by successive steps in the hearts of believers, till at length consummated in glory, in this verse, instead of studying for words answerable to his views, he seems to come to a full stop, as sensible that the strongest expressions he could use would be too faint. He makes an abrupt transition from describing to admiring. He has said much, but not enough; and therefore sums up all with, "What shall we say to these things?" Surely they who can read, with the utmost coolness and indifference, what he could not write without rapture and astonishment, do not take his words in his sense. If the apostle's phraseology is now become obsolete, and sounds uncouth in the ears of too many

who would be thought Christians, is there not too much reason to fear that they are Christians only in name?

Though this short lively question is omitted in the musical composition, I am not willing to leave it out. It stands well, as a sequel to what we have lately considered. The sting of death is taken away. Death itself is swallowed up in victory. Sinners, who were once burdened with guilt and exposed to condemnation, obtain a right to sing, “Thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ”—“What shall we say to these things?”

It stands well likewise, as introducing the following question,—“If God be for us;” if his promises, his power, his wisdom, and his love, be all engaged on our behalf, “who can be against us?” What shall we, or can we, or need we say more than this? what cause can we have for fear, or our enemies for triumph, if God be for us?

We may consider,

I. What is implied in the supposition.

II. The meaning of the inference.

I. The form of the question is hypothetical. If the assumption be right, that God is for us; the conclusion, that none can be effectually against us, is infallibly sure. Many serious persons will allow, that if God be indeed for them, all must, and will be well in the end. But they hesitate at the *if*, and are ready to ask, How shall I know that God is for me? I would offer you a few considerations towards the determining of this point, in the first place.

Sin has made an awful breach and separation between God and mankind. They are alienated in their minds from him, and he is justly displeased with them. The intercourse and communion with God, which constitute the honour and happiness of the human nature, were no longer either afforded or desired when man rebelled against his Maker, except to the few who understood and embraced his gracious purpose of reconciliation, the first intimation of which was revealed in the promise of the seed of the woman, who should bruise the serpent’s head, Gen. iii. 13. The clear and full discovery of this reconciliation is made known to us by the gospel. “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself,” 2 Cor. v. 19. God is already reconciled in his sense, that having provided and accepted a satisfaction to his law and justice, he can now, in a way worthy of himself, receive and pardon the returning sinner. And he accompanies the word of his grace with the power of his Holy Spirit, to make sinners willing to be reconciled to him. If we be for God, he is assuredly for us. If we seek him, he has been beforehand with us: for, in the first instance, he is always found of those who seek him not, Is. lxxv. 1. If we love him, it is because he first loved us. True believers walk with God. But two cannot walk together, with confidence and comfort, unless they be agreed, Amos iii. 3. This agreement is chiefly with respect to

three particulars proposed by the Lord God in his word, and to which the believing sinner cheerfully and thankfully accedes.

1. In the ground of the agreement; this is Messiah, the Mediator between God and man. When he entered upon his office, a voice from heaven commended him to sinners. "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased," Matth. iii. 17. And they who are enlightened to behold the glory of God in his person and engagement, accept him as the beloved Saviour in whom and with whom they are well pleased. Without this acceptance of the Mediator there can be no agreement. Jesus is the only door, the only way of a sinner's access to the knowledge and favour of God. This is the precious and sure foundation which he has laid in Zion (1 Pet. ii. 6); and to presume to build our hope upon any other, is to build upon a quicksand. In this point reason, in its present distempered state, would lead us, if followed, directly contrary to the simplicity of faith. Reason suggests, that if we have acted wrong we must repent and amend, and what can we do more? But the law against which we have sinned makes no provision for repentance. Nor is such a repentance as includes a change of heart (and nothing short of this deserves the name) in our own power. Repentance unto life (Acts xi. 18) is the gift of God; and Jesus, who is exalted to be a prince and a Saviour (Acts v. 31), bestows it upon those who acknowledge him, and implore it of him. But God will only treat with us as those who are condemned already, who have nothing but sin, and deserve nothing but misery. When we feel this to be our proper state, we are referred to Jesus, in whom God is well pleased, and for whose sake sins are pardoned, and sinners accepted and justified, without condition and without exception. And then likewise we begin to see the necessity, propriety, and sufficiency of this appointment. Herein all who are taught of God are of one mind. However they may differ in some respects, they agree in cordially receiving Christ Jesus the Lord (Col. ii. 6), as he is made of God for us wisdom, righteousness, and salvation.

2. They agree with God in the great design of the gospel, which is to purify unto himself a peculiar people, who, being delivered from their fears and their enemies, shall serve him with an unreserved and persevering obedience, Luke i. 74, 75. A deliverance from the power of sin and Satan, a devotedness to God, and a conformity to the mind and pattern of his dear Son, are included by every true believer in the idea of salvation. He knows that he can be happy in no other way. This is a turning point. There are convictions of sin excited by a dread of punishment, which, though distressing to the conscience, leave the heart and affections unchanged. They who are thus impressed, if no farther, would be satisfied with an assurance of pardon. But the grace of God which bringeth salvation (Tit. ii. 11, 12), teaches us to renounce, to abhor all ungodliness in the present world; to give ourselves unto him who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity;

and to walk worthy of God, who calls us to his kingdom and glory, 1 Thess. ii. 12. This is the will of God, even our sanctification. And this is the desire of his people, that they may be sanctified wholly; that their whole persons, spirit, soul, and body, may be preserved blameless; that they may be filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ; that they may walk as the sons of God without rebuke, and shine as lights in the world, Phil. ii. 15. Though their attainments are imperfect, in their judgment and desires, they are fully agreed with God as to their aim and design.

3. They are agreed with him likewise as to the ultimate great end, the final cause of their redemption, which is the praise of the glory of his grace, Eph. i. 6. That the loftiness, high looks, and proud pretences of men may be abased, and the Lord alone may be exalted, and that he who glorieth may glory only in the Lord, 1 Corinthians, i. 31. Salvation is of the Lord in every sense; the plan, the price, the power, the application, the consummation. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the author and the object of it. The praise therefore is wholly due to him, and he claims it. To this claim his people fully consent. It is the desire of their souls, that his name, which alone is excellent, may alone be extolled; and with one heart and voice they say, Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thee be all the glory and all the praise, Psal. cxv. 1.

If we truly understand and approve these things, then we are certainly engaged for God, and of course he is for us. For he alone could either enable us to see them in their true light, or incline our hearts to embrace them. Who then can be against us?

II. We are not to understand the question, “Who can be against us?” as designed to encourage us to expect that they who have the Lord on their side will meet with no opposition, but that all opposition against them will be in vain.

1. They whom God is for, will on that very account have many opposers.

(1.) The men of the world.—This our Lord expressly teaches us to expect. “If ye were of the world, the world would love its own. But because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you,” John xv. 19. And his apostle, “Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you,” 1 John iii. 14. Till we declare for him, the world will bear with us, but no longer, as the Gibeonites were in a state of honour and friendship with the neighbouring cities till they submitted to Joshua (Josh. x. 1–4); but when they obtained peace from him, they were immediately involved in war with their former friends. While Saul persecuted the church, the world smiled upon him, and he seemed to be, as we say, in the way of preferment. But when he yielded himself to the service of Christ, and his defection from the common cause became generally known, bonds and afflictions awaited him in every place; and they who before had employed and caressed him

sought his life. I do not mean to sound a trumpet of defiance. I believe that young converts, by their warm but injudicious zeal, often, more than is necessary, provoke the spirit of the world, and thereby increase their own difficulties. The gospel, when rightly understood, inspires a spirit of benevolence, and directs to a conduct which is suited to conciliate good-will and esteem. And when the apostle exhorts us, If it be possible, and as much as in us lies, to live peaceably with all men (Rom. xii. 18), he gives us hope that much may be done to soften prejudices, to put to silence the ignorance of foolish men, and to make them at least ashamed, by a patient perseverance in well-doing. A consistent Christian, whose integrity, humility, and philanthropy mark his character and adorn his profession, will in time command respect; but his attachment to unfashionable truths, and his separation from the maxims and pursuits of the many, will render him, in their eyes, singular and precise, weak and enthusiastic. If they say, "He is a good sort of man, but has some strange peculiarities," it is the most favourable judgment he can hope for; and from some persons, and at some times, he will meet with tokens of a settled dislike. For though a religious character may be formed, which even the world will approve, yet all who will live godly in Christ Jesus must suffer persecution, 2 Tim. iii. 12. They walk in the midst of observers, who watch for their halting, who lay snares for their feet, and will endeavour to bribe or intimidate them to forsake the path of duty. It is difficult to stem the torrent, or to avoid the infection of the world, and to live superior to the fear of man, as becomes us, if we know whose we are, and whom we serve. But though difficult, it is practicable and attainable, and actually attained by believers; for this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith, 1 John v. 4.

(2.) The powers of darkness.—Satan will not ordinarily trouble while he bears rule. He is indeed an enemy to his own servants, and seeks their destruction, both soul and body, by pushing them on in sin, which if persisted in will prove their ruin; but while they make no resistance, he gives them no disturbance. It is otherwise with those whom the Lord has freed from his bondage. He will pursue them like a lion seeking his prey (1 Pet. v. 8), and lie in wait for them like a serpent in the path. This is one cause of the world's hatred; for the scripture styles him the god of this world (2 Cor. iv. 4), and he sets all that he can influence, tongues, and pens, and swords, against those who are on the Lord's side. Therefore the people of God may be known by two marks. Satan by himself and by his instruments fights against them, and they also fight against him. The former without the latter is not conclusive. A mere outward profession of religion may excite opposition, and mere pretenders may take pleasure in it for a time, if it does not come too close. It may feed their vanity, and give them a sort of consequence, by having sufferings to talk of. But I would entreat my hearers seriously to examine, Is

your heart really set against sin, which is the strength of Satan's kingdom? Are you against his will and interest in the world? Have you renounced his service? If so, fear not. God is for you, and none can harm you. For,

2. No opposition can prevail against us, if God be for us. It is impossible to deny, or even to doubt this truth, upon the principles of reason; for who, or what, can injure those who are under the protection of Omnipotence? And yet it is not always easy to maintain the persuasion of it in the mind, and to abide in the exercise of faith, when, to an eye of sense, all things seem against us. But though we believe not, he continueth faithful, and will not forsake those whom he once enables to put their trust in him. Job was a faithful and approved servant of God, yet for a season his trials were great, and his confidence was sometimes shaken. But he was supported, and at length delivered. There are many instances recorded in scripture to confirm our faith, and to teach us, that God manifests himself to be for his people, and in different ways renders them superior to all their difficulties and enemies.

At one time he prevents the threatened danger. They only see it or expect it, for he is better to them than their apprehensions and fears. Thus, when Sennacherib was furious against Jerusalem, and supposed he could easily prevail, he was not suffered to come near it, Isa. xxxvii. 29, 33. When he thought to destroy it, he felt a hook and a bridle which he could not resist, and was compelled to retire disappointed and ashamed.

At another time the enemies go a step farther. His people are brought into trouble, but God is with them, and they escape unhurt. So Daniel, though he was cast into the den of lions (Dan. vi. 23), received no more harm from them than if he had been among a flock of sheep. He permitted three of his servants to be thrown into a furnace of fire, but he restrained the violence of the flames, so that not even a hair of their heads was singed, Dan. iii. 27.

The most that opposers can do is to kill the body, Luke xii. 4. If God permits his people to be thus treated, still they are not forsaken. Their death is precious in his sight, Psal. cxvi. 15. They who die in the Lord are blessed. They are highly honoured who are called and enabled to die for him. If he is pleased to comfort them with his presence, and then to take them home to himself, they can desire no more. Stephen, though apparently given up to the power of his adversaries, and cruelly stoned to death, was no less happy than those who die in composure upon their beds, with their friends around them. Nor was he less composed; for the heavens were opened to him, and he saw his Saviour in glory, approving his fidelity, and ready to receive his spirit, Acts vii. 56–60.

In brief, whatever men or devils may attempt against us, there are three things which, if we are true believers, they cannot do. They may be helpful to wean us from the world; they may add earnestness to our prayers; they may press us to greater watchfulness and dependence; they may afford fair

occasions of evidencing our sincerity, the goodness of our cause, and the power of that God who is for us.—Such are the benefits that the Lord teaches his people to derive from their sufferings, for he will not let them suffer or be oppressed in vain. But no enemy can deprive us of the love with which God favours us, or the grace which he has given us, or the glory which he has prepared for us. Now what shall we say to these things?

Alas! there are too many who say, at least in their hearts (for their conduct betrays their secret thoughts), we care but little about them. If they were to speak out, they might adopt the language of the rebellious Jews to the prophet, “As to the words which thou hast spoken to us in the name of the Lord, we will not hearken unto thee. But we will certainly do whatsoever thing goeth forth out of our own mouth,” Jer. xlv. 16, 17. And there are others who plainly say, Let us then continue in sin that grace may abound. They do not so expressly reject the gospel as to take encouragement from it to go on in their wickedness. The case of the former is very dangerous, that of the latter is still worse. But grace, though long slighted, though often abused, is once more proclaimed in your hearing. The Lord forbid that you should perish with the sound of salvation in your ears.

At present, and while you persist in your impenitence and unbelief, I may reverse the words of my text. O consider, I beseech you, before it be too late, if God be against you, who can be for you? Will your companions comfort you in a dying hour? Will your riches profit you in the day of wrath? Will the recollection of your sinful pleasures give you confidence to stand before this great and glorious Lord God, when you shall be summoned to appear at his tribunal? May you be timely wise, and flee for refuge to the hope set before you!