

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.

TO THE
PARISHIONERS OF ST. MARY WOOLNOTH,
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 VIII.

THE SUN RISING UPON A DARK WORLD.

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. ISAIAH, ix. 2.

CONTRASTS are suited to illustrate and strengthen the impression of each other. The happiness of those, who, by faith in Messiah, are brought into a state of peace, liberty, and comfort, is greatly enhanced and heightened by the consideration of that previous state of misery in which they once lived, and of the greater misery to which they were justly exposed. They are not only made meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light (Col. i. 12, 13), but they have been delivered from the powers of darkness. Thus, while they have communion with God as a father, they contemplate their privilege with a greater pleasure than they probably could do if they had never known a difference. They remember a time when they were afar off, without hope, and without God in the world; and they remember how carelessly they then trifled upon the brink of destruction. In this deplorable and dangerous situation they were found of the Lord, when they sought him not, Isa. lxxv. 1. He convinced, humbled, and pardoned them, and brought them near to himself, into a state of adoption and communion by the blood of Jesus. The admiration, gratitude, and love, which they feel for this undeserved grace, gives them a more lively sense of the blessings they enjoy. Yea, the thought of what they have been redeemed from (of which they will then have a much clearer perception than at present) will add to their joys in heaven, and inspire such a song of praise as will be peculiar to themselves, and in which the holy angels, who never felt the stings of guilt, nor tasted the sweetness of pardoning mercy, will not be able to join them. They are accordingly represented, in the prophetic vision, as standing nearest to the throne, and uniting in the noblest strains of praise to him who sitteth upon it (Rev. v. 9-21), while the surrounding angels can only take part in the chorus, and admire and adore, when they behold the brightest displays of the glory of the wonder-working God, manifested in his love to worthless, helpless sinners. These opposite ideas are joined in my text. The people, who are spoken of as rejoicing in a great light, were, till this light arose and shone upon them, in darkness; walking, sitting, living in darkness, and in the land of the shadow of death. That this passage refers to Messiah, we have a direct proof. The evangelist refers it expressly to him, and points out the time and manner of its literal accomplishment, Mat. iv. 15, 16. I shall first consider the literal sense and completion of the prophecy, and then show how fitly it applies to the state of mankind at large, and to the happy effects of the gospel of salvation; which, by the blessing of God, has been the instrument of bringing multitudes of many nations, peoples, and languages, out of a state of gross darkness, into marvellous light, 1 Pet. ii. 9.

I. Hebrew words (like many in our own language) have often more than one signification. But only one sense can be expressed in a version. And therefore interpreters and translators frequently differ. Which of the different words, used to

express the meaning of the same original term, is most happily chosen, may be sometimes decided by the context. The two words, in the first verse of this chapter, rendered *lightly afflicted* and *grievously afflicted*, signify likewise, the one to think lightly of, to account vile; and the other, to honour, to render honourable, and glorious. Both these words occur in one verse, and are used in these senses, in the Lord's message to Eli, "Them that honour me I will honour, and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed," 1 Sam. ii. 30. Had the same words been thus rendered in the passage before us, the sense of both verses would, I think, have been more plain, connected, and consistent to the following purport, agreeable to the translation given by Vitranga, and the present bishop of London. "Nevertheless there shall not be dimness [or darkness] as in the time of her vexation or distress. He formerly debased [made light or vile] the land of Zebulon and Naphtali, but in the latter time he hath made it glorious, even [the land] by the way of the sea, beyond Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles. [For] the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light," &c.—Such was the afflicted and low state of Galilee previous to the coming of Messiah; such was the exaltation and honour it derived from his appearance.

1. The land allotted to the tribes of Issachar, Zebulon, and Naphtali, was chiefly included in the province, which, upon a subsequent division of the country, obtained the name of Galilee. The northern part of it, the inheritance of Naphtali, was the boundary or frontier towards Syria, and had been frequently vexed and afflicted, when the sins of Israel brought the armies of their enemies upon them, as frontier countries usually suffer most in times of invasion and war. Particularly this part of the land, called Galilee of the Gentiles, was the first, and most immediately exposed to the ravages of Tiglath-Pilese and Sennacherib. And as the people there were likewise more mixed with foreigner, and at the greatest distance from the capital, Jerusalem, on these accounts Galilee was lightly esteemed by the Jews themselves. They thought that no prophet could arise in Galilee, John vii. 52. It even prejudiced Nathaniel against the first report he received of Jesus as Messiah, that he lived, and was generally supposed (by those who were content to be governed by popular rumour, without enquiring attentively for themselves) to have been born in Galilee. He asked with an appearance of surprise, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" John i. 46. They were accounted a rude, unpolished, provincial people. And therefore, when Peter would have denied any acquaintance with his Lord, he was discovered to be a Galilean (Mark xiv. 70), by his dialect and manner of speech.

2. This despised and least valued part of the land of Israel was the principal scene of Messiah's life and ministry, insomuch that, as I have observed, he was supposed to have been born there, a mistake which his enemies industriously supported and made the most of; for those who could persuade themselves that it was so in fact, would think themselves justified in rejecting his claim, it being one undeniable mark of Messiah, given by the prophet Micah, that he was to be born in Bethlehem of Judah, Micah v. 2. He was, however, brought up at Nazareth, and lived for a time in Capernaum, towns in Galilee, but both of so little repute, that, had they not been connected with his history, it is not probable that their names would have been transmitted to posterity.

3. But by his residence there, Galilee was honoured and ennobled. He himself declared, that on this account, Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (though probably none of them were more than inconsiderable fishing towns) were exalted even to heaven, Mat. xi. 21-23. Those were highly privileged places which our Lord condescended to visit in person; so likewise are those places where he is pleased to send his gospel. I have observed formerly, and I make no apology for repeating a truth so very important and so little attended to, that the glorious gospel of the blessed God, when faithfully preached, and thankfully received and improved, renders an obscure village more honourable, and of more real consequence, than the metropolis of a great empire, where this light shineth not. For what are the dark places of the earth, however celebrated for numbers and opulence, for the monuments of ambition and arts, but habitations of cruelty, infatuation, and misery!

4. Though Galilee was favoured with the scriptures, and with synagogue-worship, and the inhabitants were a people who professed to know the God of Israel, it was a land of darkness at the time of Messiah's appearance. Though they were not idolaters, ignorance prevailed among them. The law and the prophets were read in their synagogues, but we may believe to little good purpose, while they were under the direction of perverse teachers who substituted the traditions of men for the commands of God. The single circumstances of keeping herds of swine, as the Gadarenes did, seems a proof that the law of Moses was but little regarded by them. They, as well as the people of Judea, were under the guidance of the Scribes and Pharisees in their religious concerns, who were, if I may use a modern phrase, the clergy of that time; and these we are assured by him who knew their hearts, were generally corrupted, blind leaders of the blind. Yet they were held in ignorant admiration, and implicitly submitted to. From the character of the public ministers of religion, we may, without great danger of mistake, infer the character of the people who are pleased and satisfied with their ministrations. As the disciple cannot, ordinarily, be expected to be superior to his master (Luke vi. 10), the religion of the scribes may be taken as a standard of that of the Galileans, who were instructed by them: yet these were the people among whom Messiah chiefly conversed; so that his enemies styled him a Galilean and a Nazarene, as a mark of reproach and contempt. Many of his apostles, perhaps the most of them, were Galileans likewise. He seeth not as man seeth, 1 Sam. xvi. 7. The most of his immediate followers while upon earth were such as men despised, on account of their situation, rank, or callings; publicans and sinners, fishermen and Galileans. This was, among other reasons, for the encouragement of the poor, the destitute, the despised, the miserable, and the guilty, in succeeding ages, who should desire to put their trust in his name and to implore his mercy. To those who received him he was the light, the true light; he relieved them from the ignorance, wickedness, and distress in which he found them. They, on their parts, bore testimony to him. They saw and acknowledged his glory. They felt his power, and devoted themselves to his service. Thus much for the literal sense.

II. But this prophecy is not to be restrained to the first and more immediate season of its accomplishment. The Lord speaks thus of Messiah in another place: "It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob,

and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation to the ends of the earth,” Isaiah, xlix. 6. And there are many declarations of a like import. He is still the light of the world (John viii. 12), though no longer visible and conversant with men. By the influence and power of his Spirit, he is still present wherever his gospel is known. This his word of grace and truth he sends where he pleases, and with a discrimination not unlike that which he observed when he was upon earth. The gospel is preached to the poor. Courts and palaces are seldom favoured with it. While he passes by many great cities, many habitations of the wise and wealthy, he is known in villages and cottages. His condescension and favour to those who are unnoticed by the world cannot be too highly extolled. That the others are excluded from the same benefits is more properly to be ascribed to their obstinacy than to his will. They exclude themselves. He stands at the door and knocks, Rev. iii. 20. His word is within their reach; his ministers are within their call. They might easily enjoy every means and help which the gospel provides for sinners if they pleased, but they do not please. They are either engaged in a round of sensual pleasure, or engrossed by studies and pursuits which possess their hearts and fill up their thoughts and time, so that they have neither leisure nor inclination to attend to the things which pertain to their peace. Instead of inviting his gospel to them, they too frequently employ their power and influence to discountenance, and, if possible, to suppress it. They have their choice. The great and the gay will not receive his message; it is therefore sent to the poor and to the wretched, and they will hear it. Yet as he visited Jerusalem in person, and taught there, so London likewise is favoured with the light of his gospel. But alas! how few believe the report! They who do, experience the change described in my text. Their darkness is changed into marvellous light.

Mankind, till enlightened by the word and Spirit of grace, are truly in a state of darkness. Thick darkness is a veil which conceals from us, not only distant, but the nearest objects. A man in the dark cannot perceive either friend or enemy; he may be in great danger, yet think himself in safety; or, if he thinks himself in danger, be unable to take any step for his preservation, from a want of light. Thus, though God be our maker and preserver, though in him we live, move, and have our being, though we are surrounded with his presence, and proofs of his wisdom and goodness are before us wherever we turn our eyes, yet we live without him in the world. Equally ignorant are we of ourselves, of the proper happiness of our nature, or how it is to be attained. We know neither the cause, nor the cure, nor the consequences of our proneness to cleave to the dust, and of placing our affection on inadequate and unsatisfying objects.

And if we suppose a person awakened to a conviction of the evil of sin, and to understand that nothing less than the favour of God can make a rational and immortal creature happy, still, without the gospel, he would be in darkness and the shadow of death. His case may be compared to that of a person shipwrecked upon some desert, inhospitable coast, suffering great horrors and anxiety, from his exposedness to perish, by hunger, by enemies, or wild beasts—who, if he saw, at no very great distance, an island, and was, by some means, informed and assured that that island was the seat of safety, plenty, and pleasure; and that, if he was once

there, his dangers would all cease, and his utmost wishes be satisfied; still, if there were neither bridge, nor boat, nor any means by which he might arrive thither, to know that happiness was so near him, yet inaccessible to him, would but aggravate his misery, and make his despair more emphatically pungent. Miserable indeed must we be, if we clearly perceived that only he, whose creatures we are, can make us happy; and that, as sinners, we have forfeited his favour, and are utterly incapable of re-gaining it, if we were left under these views, without any hope of relief. Such must have been our situation sooner or later, if God, who is rich in mercy, had not himself provided the means of reconciliation. For though a hope of pardon is easily taken up by those who are ignorant of the holiness of God, and the malignity of sin, yet nothing but a declaration from himself, that there is forgiveness with him, can give peace to a truly awakened conscience. But Jesus dispels this darkness, and brings life and immortality to light by the gospel. For,

1. The office and agency of the Holy Spirit, so absolutely necessary to make us duly sensible, either of our danger, or of the possibility of escaping it, is entirely the effect of his mediation. The soul of man, originally formed to be the temple of the living God, when defiled by sin, was justly forsaken by its great inhabitant; and, since the fall, answers the prophetic description given of Babylon:

“It is become the habitation of devils, the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird,” Rev. xviii. 2. If we ask, as with good reason we may, How can the wise and holy God, who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity, and with whom evil cannot dwell, return to his sanctuary, thus polluted and profaned? an answer is afforded in that gracious promise, “I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you: and I will take away the stony heart, and I will give you an heart of flesh, and,” in order to this, “I will put my Spirit within you,” Ezek. g xxxvi. 25, 26. But the source of this mercy is his sovereign love and purpose, to give the seed of the woman, his only Son, to be the mediator of sinners. By his atonement, to be manifested in due time, but which had a vital influence from the beginning, the Holy Spirit returned to dwell with men.

2. His obedience unto death, when revealed by the Holy Spirit to the enlightened conscience, affords a clear and satisfactory discovery of reconciliation with God: it shows, that, on his part, every hindrance to the free exercise of mercy is thereby removed, the honour of his law vindicated, and the demands of his justice answered. On our parts, by opening a door of hope, it removes that enmity and obduracy of heart, which are nourished by consciousness of guilt, and a secret fore-boding of deserved punishment. But when the dignity of the Redeemer’s person, the causes, nature, and design of his sufferings are understood, emotions of admiration, love, and gratitude, till then unknown, are felt, and obstinate sinners are made a willing people in this day of divine power.

3. The doctrine of the cross pours a light upon every subject and circumstance in which we are concerned. It enlarges the mind, and forms the judgment and taste, agreeable to the standard of truth, and the real nature of things. It rectifies those prejudices and pre-possession which dispose us to mistake good for evil, and evil for good (Isa. v. 20), to pursue trifles with earnestness, and to trifle with things of the greatest importance. In Jesus Christ crucified, all the treasures of

wisdom and knowledge are at once both hidden and exhibited. This object the holy an-gels, whose knowledge of the wonders in creation, without doubt, greatly surpasses our conceptions, incessantly contemplate with delight, as affording the brightest displays of the manifold wisdom of God, Eph. iii. 10. It is especially the fountain of wisdom to sinners. They look unto him, and are enlightened. The slight and partial thoughts they once entertained of the great God, the mistaken judgment they formed of themselves, of their state and their conduct, are corrected by their knowledge of the cross: from thence they derive a solid hope, a humble spirit, just views of their duty and obligations, and motives and prospects which animate them in a course of cheerful, persevering obedience to the will of God.

4. In this way, God, as revealed in Christ, is apprehended and chosen, as the chief and proper good of the soul. Thus the poor are enriched with the pearl of great price, and the weary obtain rest. The mind, no longer burdened with anxiety, nor mortified with a succession of disappointments, which attended the vain pursuit of happiness in earthly things, possesses present peace, and rejoices in the expectation of future glory. It is released from the slavery of hewing out broken cisterns, and introduced to the fountain of living waters. Or, to close with the beautiful image in my text, The people who once walked in darkness, and the region of the shadow of death, are translated into the kingdom of life and salvation, Col. i. 13.

How greatly are they to be pitied who reject the light of the gospel. It is true, they cannot see it; but it is equally true, they will not. But may I not hope that this is a day of divine power, in which some of you shall be made a willing people? Do not reason against your own life, but repent, and believe the gospel. The light shines around you, whether you perceive it or not; and it has an efficacy to open the eyes of the blind. Where the gospel is preached, the Lord is present. If you call upon him, he will hear, and you shall receive your sight. If the grace and the glory of the Saviour have hitherto made no impression upon your heart, you are spiritually blind. Could you be sensible of your disorder, the remedy is at hand. If now, at last, you are willing to seek him, he will be found of you. But if you deliberately prefer darkness, your state is awfully dangerous; and if you persist in your obstinacy, your ruin is unavoidable. God is gracious and long-suffering, but he will not be mocked, Gal. vi. 7. Humble yourselves at once, and implore his mercy, or else prepare to meet him in judgment. But be assured he will not meet you as a man. You must either bend or break. The Lord forbid that he should say to any of you, in the great day of his appearance, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire!"