

THE
THEOLOGICAL WORKS

OF THE
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CONTAINING
THE FORCE OF TRUTH,—TREATISE ON REPENTANCE,—GROWTH IN GRACE, SER-
MON ON ELECTION AND FINAL PERSEVERANCE,—SERMONS ON SELECT SUB-
JECTS,—ESSAYS ON THE MOST IMPORTANT SUBJECTS IN RELIGION, AND THE
NATURE AND WARRANT OF FAITH IN CHRIST.

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ESSAY XVI.

On the Believer's Warfare and Experience.

THE sacred Scriptures always represent the true Christian as a soldier, engaged in an arduous warfare with potent enemies, against whom he is supported, and over whom he is made victorious by the gracious influences of the Holy Spirit, through faith in and obedience to the Lord Jesus, the captain of our salvation. But such expressions *as fighting* or *striving*, with other allusions to military affairs, imply an experience essentially different from that of those persons who never engage in the conflict, or who have already obtained the conqueror's palm: nor can any hope, or even assurance of victory and triumph, or any intervening seasons of peace and joy, entirely preclude this difference. The distinction, therefore, between the church *militant* on earth, and the church *triumphant* in heaven, hath on good grounds been established; and they who do not well understand and consider it, will be very liable to fall into several injurious, discouraging, disgraceful, or even fatal mistakes. In discussing the subject, we may first offer some reflections on the distinguishing principles, purposes, and desires of the persons who are engaged in this warfare:—we may next enumerate the enemies with whom especially they are called to contend:—we may briefly mention the encouragements, supports, and aids vouchsafed them; the weapons with which they fight, and the manner in which they must put on and use their armour:—we may then advert to the nature and effects of their victories; and then conclude with a few hints on the appropriate experience that must result from their situation.

We do not then speak, in this place, of the whole multitude who are called Christians, or who are historical believers of the scriptures; neither do we include all who would subscribe or dispute for the several doctrines that constitute the grand peculiarities of the Christian faith; nor would we be understood to mean the whole company who compose any peculiar sect or denomination, to the exclusion of others. Alas! in all these respects, strait **is** the gate, and narrow is the way, that leadeth to life, and few there be that find it; for but few “strive,” or wrestle, “to enter in” (Mat. vii. 13, 14; Luke xiii. 23-30.) A vast majority continue “to hold the truth in unrighteousness,” “to walk according to the course of this world,” and to “serve divers lusts and pleasures,” &c. Many of them, indeed, observe Gamaliel's cautious advice, and are not openly united with those, “who fight against God:” but then, they aim to observe an impracticable and inadmissible neutrality, and know nothing of fighting under the banner of Christ against the world, the flesh, and the devil, and of being his faithful soldiers to the end of their lives; unless they

have read or heard of it, in the form of baptism, or have been taught anything about it, from some orthodox catechism.

The persons, of whom this Essay treats, are those of every name, who, by obeying the truth, have been “made free from sin, and become the servants of God;” most of them remember well the time, when “they were foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another” (Titus iii. 3-7:) but “God, who is rich in mercy, of his great love, wherewith he loved them, even when they were dead in sin, hath quickened them” (Eph. ii. 1-10;) and thus “being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible,” they were enlightened to see something of the glory of God, the evil of sin, the value and danger of their souls, and their need of mercy, grace, and salvation. They were effectually warned to flee from the wrath to come, and led to repent and turn to God, to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, to renounce their former hopes of justification before God by their own merits, and to believe in Christ, that they might be justified by faith: and having experienced the work of the Holy Spirit, “as glorifying Christ” in their hearts, and showing them those things that relate to his person, love, redemption, and salvation; they have learned “to count all but loss, for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ;” they are prepared to deny themselves, bear the cross, labour, venture, suffer, and part with all for his sake; and “the love of Christ constrains them to live no longer to themselves, but to him,” and to the glory of his name.

In this manner “they are delivered from the power of darkness, and translated into the kingdom of the beloved Son of God;” they separate from his enemies, and join themselves to his friends; they throw down the arms of their rebellion, and “put on the whole armour of God:” they deliberately enlist under the banner of Christ; consider his people, cause, and honour as their own, and his enemies within and around them as equally hostile to them also. Under the conduct of divine grace, these consecrated warriors strive against sin, seeking the destruction of the kingdom of Satan in their hearts and in the world as far as their influence can reach; and do not, when most themselves, so much as entertain one thought of making any peace or truce with the enemies of Christ and of their souls. Holiness (or conformity to the law, and moral perfections of God,) they deem the health and liberty, and sin, the disease, bondage, and misery of their souls: they regard themselves as bound by the strongest and most endearing obligations, to devote themselves wholly to their God and Saviour; they esteem the interests of evangelical truth and vital godliness as of the utmost importance to the happiness of mankind; and they expect their present comfort, as well as their future felicity, from communion with God and enjoyment of his favour.

But various inward and outward impediments and obstructions combine

to counteract these desires, and to prevent their principles from entirely producing those effects, which might otherwise be expected from them: and whilst these principles struggle as it were to exert themselves, notwithstanding this opposition, a conflict ensues, to the experience of which all rational creatures in the universe, who are not thus circumstanced, must of course remain strangers: even as none, but soldiers in actual service, experience the dangers, hardships, and sufferings of a military life.

The regenerate person as *really* loves God, and desires to obey, honour, worship, and please him, and for his sake to act properly towards his brethren, as angels in heaven do: and at those times, when his heart is enlarged in holy temptations, he longs to be perfectly holy, obedient, and spiritual; the principles of the new man vigorously exert themselves; and the remains of corrupt nature, or the old man, lie comparatively dormant: the world greatly out of sight, or stripped of its attractions; and the enemies of the soul are restrained from assaulting him. But when the Christian hath left his closet, or the house of God, and is returned to the employments of his station in life, he finds himself unable to realize his previous views, or to accomplish the purposes which he most uprightly formed; and he often wonders to find himself so different a person, from what he was a few hours before. Yet this also is only partial and temporary. The better principles implanted in his soul, counteract and prevent the effect of corrupt passions and external objects: and shortly they again resume a more decided ascendancy: so that upon the whole, he successfully opposes sin, asserts his liberty, and serves God: and his state is determined by this habitual prevalence of heavenly principles; for “he walks not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.”

This conflict may easily be perceived to be a very different thing from the feeble and occasional interruption, which an unregenerate man sometimes experiences, in following the habitual inclinations of his heart. These arise only from convictions of conscience, fear of consequences, or selfish hopes. The man’s desires and affections are wholly fixed on carnal things; of *spiritual good* he cannot properly be said to have so much as one just idea; and religion is his task, of which he performs no more than what his fears or hopes impose upon him. Yet these are often confounded together, and this produces much mischief. But the enemies, with whom the Christian soldier is called to encounter, must be more precisely ascertained, if we would fully understand the important subject. The apostle having declared, that “the flesh lusteth against the spirit,” &c.; proceeds to show what are the works of the flesh, and the fruits of the spirit (Gal. v. 17-23:) by which it is evident, that *the flesh* signifies our whole nature (as born of Adam’s fallen race,) with all its propensities, animal and intellectual, as they are contrary to the spiritual commands of God; and that “*the spirit*” signifies the work of the Holy Spirit,

renewing our souls to holiness, and so teaching, disposing, and enabling us to love and serve God. “For that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

If we then proceed to examine the nature of man, we shall find that a disposition to depart from God, and idolatrously to love and seek felicity from the creatures, is common to our whole species: and from this general principle, according to different mens’ constitutions, education, habits, connections, or circumstances, some are more propense to avarice, some to ambition, some to sensual indulgence, and others to malignant passions with every possible variation. These propensities being excited by temptation, gathering force by gratification, triumphing over shame and conscience, and irritated by the interference of those who pursue the same objects, hurry men into every kind of excess, burst forth into all the variety of crimes that have prevailed in every age and nation, and produce all kinds of immorality in mens’ conduct towards each other, and all impiety, blasphemy, and other daring offences against the Almighty Governor of the Universe. And as *he* best knows the strength of a torrent, who attempts to force his way against it, so none are so well acquainted with the power of corrupt propensities and habits, as they that resolutely endeavour to overcome and extirpate them. When, therefore, holy principles have been implanted in the heart by the Spirit of God, and a man sees the urgent necessity and feels the ardent desire “of crucifying the flesh, with its affections and lusts,” then his conflict begins; for pride, anger, envy, malice, avarice, or sensual lusts being no longer allowed to domineer, abide (like a dethroned tyrant,) and have a strong party in the soul; and consequently they oppose and counteract the best desires and purposes of the believer, and engage him in a perpetual contest. At some times they find him off his guard, and gain a temporary advantage over him, which makes work for deep repentance; and at all times they impede his progress, mingle pollution in his services, and interrupt his endeavours to glorify God and adorn the gospel. These things are generally most painfully experienced in respect of those sins, which by any means had previously acquired the ascendancy over him, and in proportion to the degree in which he remits watchfulness and prayer: but even those evil propensities from which a man before thought himself most free, will be found on trial to possess great power in his soul.

The apostle gives us a very particular account of the believer’s conflict with these enemies, (Rom. vii;) for I think we may be confident that no man, except the true believer, “delights in the law of God,” “serves it with his mind,” “hates all sin,” and “has a will” to every part of the spiritual service of God: nor can we suppose that St Paul would say, “I myself,” if he meant another person of an opposite character; or use the present tense throughout,

if he referred to his experience in an unconverted state. Now the whole of the passage most aptly describes the case of a man who loves God and his service, and would obey and glorify him, as angels do: but finds the remainder of evil propensities and habits continually impeding, and often prevailing against him but who still resolutely maintains the combat with these enemies of his soul, as determined if possible entirely to extirpate them. At the same time feels his heart more pained by the opposition made by his sins to the best desires of his heart, than by all his means of grace, duties, or the improvement of their talents. But enough has been said to show, that we are called to conflict with evil spirits, who know where we are most vulnerable, and when most off our guard; whose *fiery darts* are as suited to excite our passions, as the spark is to kindle the most inflammable materials; who constantly aim to deceive, defile, discourage, or impede our course; and with whom we must expect every day to wrestle, though some are comparatively *evil* days, when they have peculiar advantages in assaulting us.

The believer is also engaged in an arduous conflict with this evil world, which is Satan's grand engine in all his stratagems and assaults. He uses the things of the world as his baits, or proposed premiums, by which to allure men to disobedience. "All," or some of "these will I give thee," is still one grand argument in his temptations. Nor is this only the case when the conduct suggested is evil in itself, and wealth, honour, or pleasure is annexed to it; but more commonly he prevails by seducing us into an inexpedient or excessive use or pursuit of worldly things. Thus ambushments are concealed in every business, connection, relation, recreation, or company; and the world prevails against us by inducing us to waste our time, to mispend what is entrusted to us, and to omit opportunities of usefulness. Moreover, what we call the evil things of the world are employed by Satan, to deter us from the profession of our faith, and the performance of our duty. Thus many are seduced into sinful compliances, and led to renounce or dissemble their religion, lest they should be ridiculed, reproached, forsaken of their friends, or exposed to hardships and persecutions; and then they flatter themselves that this *prudence* will enable them to do the more good, till the event confutes the vain imagination. Near relations, beloved friends, liberal benefactors, admired superiors, as well as powerful opposers, are often dangerous foes in this respect. Riches and poverty, youth and old age, reputation and authority, or the contrary, have their several snares; whilst politeness and rude insolence, company and retirement, assault the soul in different ways. These few hints may show, in what the believer's conflict consists, and to what continual dangers it must expose him.

When, indeed, we seriously consider the variety of those obstacles which

interrupt our course, the number, power, and malice of our enemies, the sinfulness and treachery of our own hearts, our weakness, and our exposed condition, we may well say, “who is sufficient for these things?” Or what hope is there of success in this unequal contest? But a proper attention to the Scriptures will convince us that there is no ground for despondency, or even for discouragement. The Lord assures us, that he will strengthen, assist, and uphold us, and never forsake his redeemed people. We ought not, therefore, to fear our enemies; because he will be with us; “and if God be for us, who can be against us?” Or who can doubt, but he that is in us is greater than he that is in the world? And this was typically intimated in the promises made to Israel, in respect of their wars with the Canaanites and other nations, which were shadows and figures of the good fight of faith, (Exod. xiv. 14; Deut. vii. 17, 18; Josh. x. 25, 40; 1 Sam. xiv. 6; 2 Chron. xiv. 11; Isa. xli. 10-15; liv. 15-17.) We are, therefore, exhorted “to be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might;” for “they that wait on the Lord, renew their strength;” and Jehovah, in whom is everlasting strength, is become our salvation.

All power in heaven and earth is vested in the Lord our Righteousness. He is head over all things to his church; and his servants have always found, that in proportion as they simply trusted in him, “they could do all things;” and that “when they were weak, then were they strong;” for the “power of Christ rested upon them,” (2 Cor. xii. 9-11; Phil. v. 13.) He restrains and moderates as he sees good, the assaults of our outward enemies, or confounds their devices, and defeats their deep-laid machinations. All providential dispensations are directed by him, nor can any tribulation or temptation exceed the bounds he assigns them, though all the powers of earth and hell should combine against one feeble saint. The Holy Spirit communicates strength to our faith, fear, love, hope, patience, and every principle of the new man, imparts strong consolations and heavenly joys, effectually restrains the energy of corrupt passions, and disposes us to self-denial, to bear the cross, to persevere in well-doing, and to dread sin, and separation from Christ, or even dishonouring him, more than any other evil that can befall us. Supported, strengthened, and encouraged in this manner, believers have in every age been enabled “to fight the good fight of faith,” and to “overcome every foe by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony, and have not loved their lives unto the death,” (Rev. xii. 11.) Nay, they have generally acquitted themselves most honourably when their adversaries were most formidable, and their temptations apparently most invincible; because they were then most simply dependent on, and most fervent in praying for the all-sufficient grace of the Lord Jesus, and most steadfast in contemplating his sufferings and the glory that followed.

In order to maintain this conflict with good hope of success, we must take

to ourselves and “put on the whole armour of God.” Conscious sincerity in our profession of the gospel must be “as the girdle of our loins,” without which we shall be entangled and embarrassed in all our conduct. An habitual obedient regard to our Lord’s commands, as the rule of righteousness must be our breast-plate, in facing our foes: whilst a distinct knowledge, and cordial reception of the “gospel of peace,” and the way of access, pardon, reconciliation, and acceptance in the divine Saviour, must be “the shoes of our feet,” our only effectual preparation for firmly standing our ground, or comfortably marching to meet our assailants. Above all, *faith* or a firm belief of the truths, and reliance on the promises of God, must be our “shield,” with which we may ward off and extinguish the “fiery darts of Satan,” and prevent their fatal effects: *hope* of present support and heavenly felicity must be as a helmet to cover our head in the day of battle; and with the plain testimonies, precepts, promises, and instructions of the word of God, as “with the sword of the Spirit,” we must (after our Lord’s example) repel the tempter, and so resist him, that he may flee from us (Eph. vi. 10-18; 1 Thess. v. 5, 6.) In short, “the weapons of our warfare are not carnal:” worldly wisdom, philosophical reasonings, and our own native strength and resolution (like Saul’s armour, when put upon David,) can only encumber us: but when conscious of our weakness and unworthiness, and distrusting our own hearts, we “strive against sin, looking unto Jesus,” relying on his power, truth, and grace, and observing his directions. When we aim to do his will, to seek his glory, and copy his example, then indeed we are armed for the battle: and however men may despise our weapons (as Goliath did David the shepherd with his staff, his sling, and stones,) we shall not be put to shame in the event, but shall be made more than conquerors over every inward and outward foe. This armour is prepared in Christ “our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption;” and in “his fulness of grace:” we take it to ourselves by “the prayer of faith,” by searching and meditating on the Scriptures, and attendance on the means of grace: by watchfulness, sobriety, habitual circumspection and caution, &c., we put it on and keep it bright: and thus we are continually prepared for the conflict, and not liable to be surprised at unawares, or to fall into the ambushments of our vigilant enemies, (Matt. xxvi. 41; Luke xxi. 31-36; Rom. xiii. 11-14; 1 Pet. v. 8, 9.) And when we live at peace with our brethren, and pray for, warn, counsel, and encourage them also, we fight the good fight, as a part of the great army which is enlisted under the Redeemer’s standard, to wage war against sin, the world, and the powers of darkness.

As far as we are enabled in this manner successfully to oppose our own corrupt passions, and various temptations, we gain victories which afford us present comforts, lively hopes, and discoveries of the Lord’s love to our souls; and hereafter “glory, honour, and immortality.” Our captain assures

every one of his soldiers of this inestimable recompense; and if they are slain in the conflict, this will only put them more speedily in possession of the conqueror's crown. In respect of others, our warfare is directed to the encouragement and help of our fellow-soldier; the salvation (not the destruction) of our fellow-sinner; the benefit of all around us; and above all, the honour of our divine Saviour, by the spread of his gospel among men. Our bold profession of the truth, our exemplary conduct, expansive benevolence, fervent prayers, improvement of talents, and unremitting attention to the duties of our several stations, with quietness and prudence, as well as zeal, promote these ends. The religion of Jesus is thus continued from age to age, by the conversion of sinners to the faith: and though the seed of the serpent still bruises the Redeemer's heel in the sufferings of his people, yet Satan is, as it were, put under the feet of every true Christian at death, and Christ will at length finally and completely crush his head, whilst all his faithful soldiers shall attend his triumphs and share his glory.

It must appear from this compendious view of our conflicts, that all who are really engaged in them, experience a variety of changing emotions in their minds, to which others remain entire strangers. They must often mourn their ill success, or that of the common cause, or rejoice in the advantages attained or hoped for. Sometimes they will be ashamed and alarmed, by being baffled; and at others they will resume courage and return to the conflict. They will always come far short of that entire victory over their appetites, passions, and temptations, to which they aspire; they cannot therefore be so calm as indifference would render them. Much self-denial must be required in such a case, and perpetual fears of being surprised by the enemy. Yet their very alarms, tears, groans, and complaints, are evidences that they are Christ's disciples: their joys (with which a stranger intermeddled not) far more than counterbalance their sorrows, and they can often triumph in the assured hope of final victory and felicity, even amidst the hardships and sufferings of the field of battle.