PART THIRD.

Encouragements to Repentance.

I HAVE already intimated, that he who, convinced of the necessity of repentance, in good earnest uses those means which God hath appointed in order to it, may depend upon the effectual assistance of the Holy Spirit in this important undertaking, which will render it both practicable and pleasant and the same topic will afterwards be resumed, when those means are treat­ed of. I shall not therefore farther speak upon that subject in this place, but lead your attention to those encouragements which arise from the as­surance that repentance is inseparably connected with salvation.

I. In the *first* place, “God commandeth all men everywhere to repent.” Were there any of the human race who did not need repentance, or any to whom repentance would be unavailing, we may be sure God would not have given such a commandment. He sends no message of this kind to fallen an­gels, or to the souls of wicked men who have died in their sins; because he hath determined to show them no mercy. Having done wrong in sinning, doubtless they continue to do wrong in not repenting; and their impenitent rebellion and enmity to God will eternally illustrate his justice in their con­demnation; as all will see, that he doth not without cause treat them as enemies. A man who hath murdered his lawful prince, though the law must have its course, ought to repent, and shows astill more desperate spirit of rebellion if he die vindicating his conduct. Yet the avenger of blood, de­signing no mercy, requires no submission. A command to submit and repent, if sent to a company of condemned criminals, would directly excite a beam of hope in every relenting breast.—God sends his ministers and his word, commanding thee O sinner, to repent; were no more said, thou mightest safely draw this conclusion:—“Certainly he hath thoughts of peace, and intends to show mercy to all who obey the summons.”

II. God is always in Scripture represented as peculiarly ready to receive and entertain repenting sinners: “I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus: Thou hast chastised me and I was chastised, as a bullock un­accustomed to the yoke: turn thou me and I shall be turned; for thou art the LORD my God. Surely after that I was turned, I repented; and after that I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh. I was ashamed, yea even confounded, because I did bear the reproach of my youth. Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he a pleasant child? for since I spake against him, I do ear­nestly remember him still: therefore my bowels are troubled for him, I will surely have mercy upon him, saith the LORD.” Jer. xxxi. 18-20. Here is the true penitent, mourning for sin, covered with shame, and crying for mercy: and the encouraging answer of that God, “who waited to be gra­cious.” The same is most emphatically inculcated by the experience of David in the thirty-second Psalm. In this, mark carefully how soon the sweet sense of forgiving love followed his ingenious confession of guilt.

But omitting many other Scriptures, for the sake of brevity, let me detain you a little in meditating on the prodigal son; a parable spoken on purpose to encourage the publicans and sinners, who listened to the words of Jesus. Let us attentively consider the character of the prodigal, his disdainful and ungrateful behaviour to a wise and indulgent father, his debauched and dis­solute life, and the misery to which he was reduced. Here, as in a glass, we may see ourselves; our pride and ingratitude, our contempt of God and wil­ful departure from him, our folly, and our misery whilst we live in sin. Then let us view him at length *come to himself,* conscious of his guilt, sinking under his misery, covered with shame, adopting the resolution of returning to his offended father, with penitent confessions, and humble supplications. Discouraged as well as humbled, by the recollection of his own vileness, his only hope arises from meditating on the kindness of him whom he had so basely offended; and he can just enough raise his mind above despondency to expect, that, perhaps, after many repulses, and reiterated submissions and entreaties, answered by deserved upbraidings, his father might be at length prevailed on to admit him, in some mean capacity, to share that plenty which his servants enjoyed. Here we have the frame of spirit, the hopes, and the fears of the true penitent, most affectingly delineated. But, behold the ten­der father is looking out with eager expectation, for the return of his lost prodigal! he sees him afar off, and, through parental tenderness and compassion, is regardless of his age and gravity, and runs to meet him. Finding that he abhorred and condemned himself, without one reproach or the least delay, he welcomes him as a son: he clothes, he feasts, and rejoices over him, and commands all his servants to rejoice with him: “Because,” says he, “this my son was dead, and is alive! was lost, and is found!”

Thus shall every true penitent be welcomed by a gracious God. Not only shall he meet with a kinder reception than his fears foreboded; but his most sanguine expectations shall be far exceeded; his sins, however numerous, shall not be mentioned against him; his wants shall be all supplied: pardon, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost shall be conferred on him; the robe of righteousness and salvation shall clothe him; angels in heaven shall rejoice more over him, than over ninety and nine Pharisees, who in their own judge­ment need no repentance; yea, God himself shall acknowledge him as his own child, and rejoice over him to do him good! Arise then, poor dejected sinner, and imitate this prodigal.

III. We have seen, that repentance and forgiveness are connected, in a great many texts of Scripture which have been cited, and many others might be produced. But I would more especially call your attention to those en­couraging promises, which are expressly confined to such as are exercising repentance. It would be a needless prolixity to enumerate the whole, or the most of these promises! a few examples may suffice: “Thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.” “To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite heart, and that trembleth at my word.” Is. lvii. 15. lxvi. 2. “He looketh upon men, and if any say I have sinned, I have perverted that which is *right,* and it profiteth me not; he shall deliver his soul from going down into the pit, and his life shall see the light.” Job xxxiii. 27, 28. “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but he that confesseth and forsaketh his sin, shall find mercy.” Prov. xxviii. 13. “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us; but if we confess our sins, God is faith­ful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteous­ness.” 1 John i. 9. Let but the broken-hearted sinner well consider these few citations, and plead them in prayer, through the intercession of Jesus, and he will find them full of consolation. Then let him search the Scrip­tures, and he will observe, that no one character is so particularly encouraged as that of the penitent, under the titles of mourners, poor in spirit, contrite, humble, and such others, as are included in the explanation which has been given of true repentance. These things abundantly prove, that none but true penitents share the blessings, or are entitled to the consolations which flow from the salvation of the gospel; and that no degree of aggravated guilt can exclude any repenting sinner from the participation of the one, and the enjoyment of the other.

But let not any from hence conclude, that these privileges are properly the *rewards* of repentance, or that it *atones* for our crimes. This would su­persede the necessity of the expiatory sufferings of Jesus, and militate with St Paul’s express declaration, “that we are justified by *faith,* through the righteousness of Christ,” and consequently would infer, “that Christ died in vain.” Did we repent of ourselves, without the preventing and assisting grace of God; and were our repentance perfect in its nature and fruits, it could not avail for our justification in any degree. It is indeed observable, that even they who speak of atoning for our transgressions of the divine law by repentance, change their language when they have occasion to treat of the laws of human governments: you seldom hear them speak of a traitor or murderer making atonement for his crimes by *repentance,* but by *his death.* This sacrifice to justice the law demands: this alone expiates the offence: and if a criminal, however penitent or disposed to future obedience, escape punishment; the law is dispensed with, justice is relaxed, and no atonement made. But God’s justice is perfect, and can admit of no relaxation: his law must be magnified and made honourable, and cannot be dispensed with. Not the repentance, but the eternal punishment of the offender, is the atonement indispensably insisted upon, or one equally honourable to the precept and sanction of the divine law. This the true penitent perceives or allows; he subscribes the sentence of his own condemnation, and humbly trusts in that vicarious atonement, which the Son of God once made, and which is of in­finite value and efficacy; and through which “God is JUST, and the justifier of the believer.” That repentance which is depended on for justification, is a proud unbelieving repentance, and not the humble repentance here treated of.

But in fact, repentance, where it is genuine, is the gift of God. Thus St Paul speaks on this subject to his beloved Timothy. “In meekness in­structing those that oppose themselves, if God peradventure will give them repentance, to the acknowledging of the truth, and that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.” 2 Tim. ii. 25, 26. In like manner the apostle Peter, before the Jewish rulers, declared, concerning Jesus, whom they had crucified: “Him hath God exalted to be a Prince and a Saviour, to give repentance unto Is­rael, and forgiveness of sins.” And when the same apostle gave his brethren and the church at Jerusalem an account of the conversion of Cornelius and his household, they “glorified God, saying, Then hath God to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.” Acts v. 31. xi. 28.

This accords to the prediction or promise which JEHOVAH gave by the prophet Zechariah,—“I will pour out upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and supplication; and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son.” Zech. xii. 10. This was fulfilled in part, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the crucifiers of Christ, on the day of Pen­tecost, and when, being pricked to the heart, and inquiring of the apostles “what they must do;” three thousand obeyed the call to “Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins.” In entire harmony with these decisive testimonies of holy writ, are those petitions in our excellent liturgy, which, alas! are often so familiar to the ear, as scarcely to excite the attention of the understanding, and not at all to affect the heart, of many professed worshippers in the established church: “Let us beseech him to grant us true repentance and his Holy Spirit.” “That it may please thee to give us true repentance.” “Create and make in us new and con­trite hearts;” with expressions implying the same important truth, which continually occur in many parts of our truly scriptural liturgy.

In fact, though we have so much cause for repentance, and *are in duty* bound to repent; yet our proud carnal hearts are naturally destitute of the least disposition or inclination to this duty. The shame therefore of our ob­stinate impenitency belongs to us; but the whole glory of our repentance, when the grace of God disposes and enables us to repent, is due to him, “who worketh in us to will and to do of his good pleasure.” So far then are we from *meriting* anything by repenting, that we are laid under fresh obligations to him “who hath granted us repentance unto life.” “Do not err, my beloved brethren, every good gift, and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights.” Yet, on the other hand, let us not regard those who represent our natural want of inclination as an excuse for impenitency; not considering that the dominion of pride, and the love of sin, in the heart, which renders us incapable of our duty, forms itself the very essence of that impenitent heart, which God abhors and will con­demn, and which cannot be its own excuse. Nor is the most penitent per­son in the world perfect in his repentance. No man hates sin in a degree equal to its hatefulness: no man condemns, abases, and abhors himself, as much as he ought to do; or as much as he would, did he more perfectly be­hold the glory of God, the excellency of the law, the evil of sin, and the mul­titude of his own transgressions; or had he more fixed views of the nature and glory of the sufferings of Jesus Christ. He that is habitually most penitent, finds his repentance capable of increase when his views are enlarged, and his heart is peculiarly affected with these discoveries: but even in these seasons, his enlarged godly sorrow is little in comparison to what it ought to be, and would be, did he, instead of “seeing through a glass darkly, see face to face.” How far then doth the general frame of his spirit, when his mind is comparatively dark and unaffected, come short of the perfection of repent­ance! Over this every sincere Christian mourns, and for this seeks forgive­ness.

For similar reasons the *fruits* of repentance do nothing towards atoning for our sins, meriting a reward, or justifying us before God. Take a fa­miliar illustration: You owe your tradesman a sum of money; and you now continue to deal with him for ready money only: yet the old debt is not by this diminished. But should you daily purchase to the value of a crown: and only pay daily one shilling, your debt would rapidly increase.—Perfect obedience is no more than what is due to our Creator: so that after we have by sin for years run in arrear with him, did we obey, for all the remainder of a long life, as perfectly as an arch-angel, our love and obedience would be no more than his due for the present, and could do nothing towards dis­charging the old account: even with the apostle Paul’s obedience the debt would rapidly increase. Sure I am, whilst I now write, that I this moment am more deeply deserving of condemnation than ever; because, though I hope sincerely penitent, I daily add recent transgressions to my former sins, and shall certainly perish, if Jesus do not plead for me, “Deliver him from going down into the pit—behold the ransom.”

This salvation, through the ransom and intercession of the Son of God, every true penitent cordially approves, and thankfully embraces, and shall certainly participate. My brethren, an impenitent believer and a penitent unbeliever are ideal characters, which have no existence unless in some men’s imaginations: except where the repentance is counterfeit, and the faith dead. Genuine repentance and faith are twin graces produced together, thriving together, and forwarding each other’s growth. It is true, some exercises of faith precede, and produce repentance in the regenerate soul: but repent­ance precedes, and makes way for that exercise of faith, which interests the soul in the merits of Christ for salvation. The belief of the existence and perfections of God, his law and government of our relations, obligations, and accountableness to him; of the future state, the day of judgment, heaven and hell, always precedes repentance, and is influential in leading man to it: a belief of several truths respecting Jesus Christ and his salvation, generally, though perhaps not always, precedes. But he must be already in some de­gree penitent, who can cordially approve and embrace that salvation; for whilst a man remains impenitent, his proud heart will have insuperable ob­jections to it; insuperable I say, in any other way, than by that change of judgment and disposition, which is denominated repentance.

The salvation revealed in the gospel, exalts God upon the throne, and re­quires the sinner to submit to his authority and righteousness, and give him the whole glory of his salvation. This appears most equitable to the true penitent, and to him alone. “Let God be glorified, says he, by all in heaven and earth, whatever becomes of me; but should he mercifully save so vile and worthless a rebel, I shall be an eternal monument of the richness of his mercy, and the power of his grace.” The gospel is intended to put honour upon the law: “It is holy, just, and good,” says the penitent soul: “I con­sent unto it that it is good,” and I have “deserved its awful curse for my vile transgressions: I rejoice to see this holy law magnified, in the obedience unto death of God incarnate: I long to have it written in my heart by the finger of the Spirit: and my prayer is, “O that my ways were directed to keep thy righteous precepts!” The gospel shows sin to be exceedingly sinful, and discovers its infinite odiousness and just demerit; the true penitent, and he alone, irreconcilably hates all sin, even that which was his most darling indulgence. The gospel abases the sinner, silences his excuses, rejects his pleas, strips him of his distinctions; and, without regard to his learning, wisdom, wealth, honour, morality, or amiable character among men, treats him as a sinner condemned to die, deserving and fitted for destruction. To this the true penitent, and he alone, cordially submits. “I loathe and ab­hor myself.” “To me belongs shame and confusion of face,” is the genuine expression of his humbled heart:

The gospel honours Christ as the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End, the All in all: thus he appears to the true penitent, and to none else. In his person, undertaking, righteousness, atonement, resurrection, mediatorial exaltation, offices (as King, Priest, and Prophet,) intercession, instructions, example, and Spirit of grace, he appears to the humbled sinner altogether suitable, sufficient, and precious. On every other side despair lowers: the glory of God, and the honour of the law, demand his destruction: but here hope brightens; here he sees God glorious, and sinners saved; here he sees everything exactly suited to his wants and his desires; here he may have his sins pardoned, his corruptions subdued, his ignorance removed, grace communicated, strength renewed, and everything bestowed freely, without money and without price, which can raise him from the brink of hell, and the borders of despair, to the lively hope of an inheritance in­corruptible, undefiled, and unfailing. Christ appears to him “the Pearl of great price,” “the Chief among ten thousand, and altogether lovely.” “He counts all but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of him.” To him he flees, though with trembling heart, lest he should meet with a repulse; with trembling hand he lays hold on this only hope; to him he cleaves in the midst of discouragements and delays, and answers every rising despondency with “Lord, to whom shall I go, thou hast the words of eternal life.” Nothing but impenitent pride and love of sin, render men blind to the glory, deaf to the voice, or negligent to the salvation of our Lord Jesus Christ: nor can anything but a penitent sense of the evil of sin, and the misery of a sinner, reconcile the proud heart of man to this salvation.

Though repentance therefore does not in any degree merit pardon; yet it is that disposition of mind which both prepares the soul to receive it, and renders the possessor a meet object on whom a holy God may honourably bestow it: and no further obstacle remaining, divine justice being satisfied in the sufferings of the Redeemer, the point yielded by the sinner’s repent­ance, that he did deserve to perish, and is saved by free grace; and his heart being now rendered willing to be saved in the appointed way; he shall, with­out all doubt or delay, have salvation, and the consolation which springs from it.

Were more encouragement needful, I might lead your attention to the many examples with which the word of God furnishes us, of sinners, who had committed the most atrocious crimes, and borne the most infamous char­acters, for complicated long-continued guilt, who on repentance were par­doned and saved. It will be enough to recite a few of their names: such were Manasseh; the woman who was a sinner,—a scandalous and notorious sinner: the thief on the cross; Saul the persecutor; and the very men who crucified the Prince of Life! These instances are doubtless recorded pur­posely for the encouragement of those, who are ready to conclude that their sins are too many and too great to be forgiven; and they form a very im­portant proof and exemplification of our doctrine; that no degree of guilt can exclude the true penitent from forgiveness, through the blood of Christ. For although our Lord speaks of some who sin against the Holy Ghost, and shall never be forgiven; and the apostle John mentions a sin unto death, which they who have committed should not be prayed for: yet St Paul extricates us out of this difficulty, by informing us, that it is impossible to renew them to repentance;” which forms indeed an awful warning to those who harden their hearts against conviction and live in impenitency, but affords no exception to our doctrine, and needs give no discouragement to the penitent soul.

And now, sinners, you see the necessity of repentance, the real nature of it, and the abundant encouragement you have to repent. I would hope that from regard to your eternal welfare, you will set about it in good earnest; not only in preference to your vain amusements and dissipations, but even to your most important business and interests which are of no consequence in comparison with this “one thing needful.” Arise then, and be doing, and the Lord will both assist and prosper your endeavours.