

THE

THEOLOGICAL WORKS

OF THE

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CONTAINING

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

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SERMONS.

SERMON I.

THE TRUTH AND IMPORTANCE OF SCRIPTURE REVELATION.

DEUTERONOMY XXXII. 47.

It is not a vain thing for you, because it is your life.

THE honoured servant of God, whose words are here selected, was favoured with health and the unabated force of all its faculties, at a very advanced time of life: and, so far from claiming a privilege of relaxation from labour, he seems, as death approached, to have redoubled his diligence, in order that the Israelites might have the things which he had taught them, in perpetual remembrance. A hoary head is indeed a crown of glory, when thus found in the way of righteousness: and “blessed is that servant, whom his Lord when he cometh shall find so doing.”

Among other methods of durably impressing the minds of the people, Moses was directed to compose a prophetic song; as poems are generally learned with greater eagerness, and remembered more easily than other compositions: and at the close of this sacred song he thus addressed the people, “Set your hearts unto all the words which I testify among you this day, which ye shall command your children to observe to do, even all the words of this law. For it is not a vain thing for you, because it is your life: and through this thing ye shall prolong your days in the land, whither ye go over Jordan to possess it.” Having given this earnest admonition, he was directed to ascend mount Nebo, that he might die there: a circumstance which could not fail to add peculiar energy to his concluding exhortations.

The nation of Israel had spiritual blessings proposed to them by types and shadows, and Canaan represented the everlasting felicity of heaven, the inheritance of true believers. We live under a different dispensation, and enjoy peculiar advantages. “God, who at sundry times, and in divers manners, spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son.”—“Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip:—for how shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation?” Heb. i. 1–3. ii. 1–3. The words of the text are therefore at least as applicable to us, as they were to Israel of old; and we may from them take occasion—

- I. To consider the subject, which is declared to be no vain thing.
 - II. To illustrate the import of that declaration.
 - III. To conclude the whole by a practical improvement.
- I. Let us consider the subject, which is declared to be no vain thing.

No doubt Moses spake this concerning religion: but numbers would agree to the sentiment as thus stated, who would object to it when more particularly explained. For it is evident that the prophet was not speaking of natural religion, or that religion which man in his present condition can discover or attain, by the exercise of his natural powers without any assistance from revelation. Alas! the history of the human race proves, that this is indeed a vain thing, and utterly insufficient to direct us into the knowledge of God, or to make us partakers of happiness in his presence and favour. But that religion, which Moses had taught Israel, was given by immediate revelation from God, and was exclusively intended. The same is delivered to us at present, more fully and plainly, in the sacred Scriptures; and we may perhaps obtain the clearest conceptions of it, by considering them as a message from God to us; sent by prophets, apostles, and evangelists; or rather by his well-beloved Son. As far therefore as ministers adhere to the oracles of God, they also deliver the same message; and all, who disbelieve or despise them, disbelieve and despise him that sent him.

This message from God declares to us his own mysterious nature, by which he is distinguished from all the objects of idolatrous worship; it discovers to us his glorious attributes; his infinite power, knowledge, wisdom, and greatness; his eternal, omnipresent, unchangeable, and incomprehensible majesty; but above all, his consummate justice, holiness, truth, goodness, and mercy, as harmoniously exercised in his dealings with his rational creatures, and comprising the full perfection of all that is adorable and excellent.

The message teaches us our relations and obligations to this glorious God, as our Creator, from whom we derive our being and all our capacities; “in whom we live and move and are,” and “who giveth us all things richly to enjoy and as our Governor and Judge, to whom we are in all respects accountable. It further assures us, that our souls are immortal; that our bodies will rise again from the dead; that after death is the judgment; and that a state of eternal retributions will succeed to the present transitory scene. And after all the conjectures, and boasted demonstrations of philosophers, even these fundamental doctrines must rest entirely on the sure testimony of God: for could it be proved with certainty that the soul is naturally immortal, who could know, whether the Creator might not see good to annihilate it, now it is become contaminated with sin? So that in every sense, “life and immortality are brought to light by the gospel.”

The same message from God makes known to us his holy law, in its extensive, spiritual, and reasonable requirements, and awful sanction; with the rules of his providential government. It instructs us in the malignant nature, and fatal consequences of sin; and gives us a general intimation of the manner in which this destructive evil entered into the world; though it does not satisfy our curiosity by fully explaining that mysterious subject, the

difficulties of which are not peculiar to any religious system. But it far more copiously and clearly instructs us in the way, by which we may be saved from sin and misery, which is unspeakably more conducive to our advantage.

The Scriptures are indeed more especially a message from God to us, concerning the person and salvation of Christ. “This is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life, and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.” 1 John v. 11, 12. This is the centre of revelation, in which all the lines meet from every part of its ample circumference. The everlasting mercy of God in purposing the salvation of sinful men; his infinite wisdom, forming the grand design of glorifying his justice and holiness, even in pardoning and blessing those who deserved the most tremendous punishment; his unfathomable love, in giving his only-begotten Son to be the Saviour of the world; the great mystery of godliness, “God manifest in the flesh,”—Emmanuel purchasing the church with his own blood; the love of Christ in his obedience unto the death of the cross for us; his glorious resurrection, ascension, and mediatorial exaltation;—these constitute the central and most essential part of the message of God to us. “This,” says he, by a voice from heaven,

This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased: hear ye him.”

Revelation also announces to us our real situation in this world, as criminals condemned to die: “Dust ye are, and to dust ye shall return.” This sentence will certainly and shortly be executed upon every one of us; but we are also liable to a more awful condemnation in another world, from which deliverance may now be obtained. We are therefore respited from day to day: or rather we are put to death by a lingering execution; as every pain, disease, or natural decay is an anticipation of the separating stroke. But we are placed under a dispensation of mercy, and it is the grand concern of our fleeting days to seek the forgiveness of our sins, and the salvation of our souls, before the opportunity be for ever gone. The message therefore warns all men to flee from the wrath to come, commands them to repent and believe in Christ, and exhorts them without delay to forsake and break loose from every object, which keeps them from “fleeing for refuge to lay hold on the hope set before them” in the gospel.

The sacred Scriptures give us likewise most important information concerning the Holy Spirit, as the author of divine life, and the giver of wisdom, strength, holiness, and consolation; as engaged to give efficacy to the word of salvation by his regenerating influences; and as promised to all those who pray for the inestimable benefit. “If ye, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him.” Luke xi. 13.

The same divine message prescribes also the means, by which we may apply for these blessings, and render our benefactor the tribute of thankful

adoration. It directs us to diligent and persevering investigation of the Scriptures, and to continual earnestness in prayer; it reveals to us our God upon a throne of grace, to which we are invited to approach through a merciful and faithful High Priest: suggests pleas to be used in our supplications; and sets before us exceedingly great and precious promises, to direct our desires and animate our hopes; and it appoints other ordinances, in which we may wait on the Lord, and renew our strength, that we may run with patience the race set before us. We are also informed in the same manner, that there is an innumerable company of holy angels, who worship before the throne of God, and are nevertheless “all sent forth to minister unto the heirs of salvation and on the other hand, that there are fallen angels, numerous, powerful, subtle, malicious, and indefatigable, who watch every opportunity of doing us mischief, and especially of deceiving, defiling, and ruining our souls; from whose devices we can have no security but in the protection and guidance of him, who “was manifested to destroy the works of the devil.”

Finally, the message of God shows us the peculiar character, motives, and conflicts of those who are truly religious; and distinguishes them from all other persons: and it gives directions, instructions, examples, cautions, and encouragement sufficient to render us wise unto salvation, and thoroughly furnished unto every good work. This view of the subject is indeed too compendious to give us an adequate idea of it; but it must suffice for out-present purpose. We proceed therefore—

II. To illustrate the import of the declaration, “It is not a vain thing for you, because it is your life.”

“Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God *in vain* that is, to confirm a false or doubtful assertion, or in a trifling concern. This may throw light upon the subject before us. The message contained in the Scriptures does not relate to things false or doubtful. There are indeed religious impostors, deluded enthusiasts, and priestly usurpations; but all religion is not enthusiasm or priest-craft: general declamations to this effect only prove that men are *unable* or *unwilling* to distinguish betwixt the genuine and the counterfeit: which evinces, that either their understandings or their hearts are very defective.—The apostle Peter, just before his martyrdom, endeavouring that the disciples might be able, after his decease, to have the things he had taught them always in remembrance, added,—“For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known to you the power and coming of the Lord Jesus, but were eye witnesses of his majesty; for he received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him on the holy mount.” But aware that the belief of this event depended entirely on his testimony, with that of James and John, he subjoined,—“We have also a more

sure word of prophecy, whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day-star arise in your hearts," 2 Pet. i. 16–19.

It may indeed be argued very forcibly, that the *public* miracles, recorded in Scripture, could never have obtained credit among contemporaries, had they not been actually performed; and that no future generation of Israelites or Christians could possibly have been persuaded, that their forefathers had always believed them, had the report been afterwards invented and propagated. Would it, for instance, by any method be practicable, to bring the inhabitants of this nation to believe, that a hundred years ago the Prince of Orange, when he obtained the throne of these kingdoms, marched an army through the German ocean, and that this had always been known and credited?

The argument therefore from miracles openly performed, or publicly attested before those possessed of power, and engaged by interest, reputation, and inclination to disprove them, is very conclusive: and perhaps no past event was ever so fully authenticated, as the resurrection of Christ, on which the whole fabric of revelation in some respects depends. Yet *to us* the word of prophecy may be said to be still more sure: for a system of predictions of remote events, which no finite mind could possibly foresee, is interwoven with every part of the Scriptures, and reaches from the first promise of the Seed of the woman, to the close of the sacred canon. These have been exactly fulfilling through successive ages, in respect of the Jews and the surrounding nations; the coming of the Messiah, and every circumstance of that grand event; with the subsequent concerns of the church and of the world to this present day. This forms such a demonstration that the Bible is indeed the word of God, that the more carefully it is examined, with a serious and impartial mind, the fuller conviction it must produce. It is indeed a kind of unobtrusive permanent miracle, which escapes the notice of the careless, but gives entire satisfaction to the diligent inquirer; and to this, all who have doubts on the subject, will do well to take heed, "as to a light shining in a dark place," till their own experience of the blessed effects produced by the gospel, prove an inward witness, the dawn of eternal life in their souls.

We might adduce many other arguments in confirmation of this truth, from the nature and tendency of the sacred oracles; the character of those in every age, who have most firmly believed them; the efficacy of the pure gospel on the minds and conduct of mankind, in rendering them wise, holy, peaceful and happy; and the manifold consequences which must follow, if all men did indeed repent of sin, believe in Christ, worship God spiritually, love him supremely, and love one another with a pure heart fervently. But these few hints are sufficient to show that our religion is no vain or doubtful matter, but an authenticated revelation from God; and that men oppose it, because it

testifies of them that their works are evil, and cannot be made consistent with the “lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life.”

Neither is it a superfluous or unnecessary thing. Whatever plausible and soothing notions students in their retirement may entertain, facts undeniably prove, that reason, untutored by revelation, uniformly leads men into atheism, idolatry, impiety, superstition, or enormous wickedness. Renowned and elegant Greece and Rome sunk as deep into these absurd abominations as the barbarians whom they despised. The philosophical Athenians were ignorant worshippers of an unknown God, amidst their highest improvements; nor have the most celebrated modern unbelievers been preserved, from most gross absurdities, or lamentable ignorance. How confused are their discourses, when they attempt to show, in what way a sinner may be justified before God! Or when they would instruct mankind in the method of conquering bad habits, resisting strong temptations, overcoming the world, or meeting death with humble, serious, and reflecting composure!

If then unaided reason, in its highest advancement, can give so little satisfactory information on these most important points, what must have been the state of the world at large, if revelation had not been vouchsafed? So far, therefore, from deeming it unnecessary, we ought to value it unspeakably more than gold and precious stones; and to relish it “as sweeter than honey and the honey-comb.”

The message of God is no vain thing, because it is exactly adapted to the condition of mankind, and fully adequate to the case of the most enslaved sinner upon earth. If a man’s crimes have been ever so numerous, complicated, and atrocious, during the whole course of a long life; if his propensities, habits, and connections, expose him to the combined force of many formidable temptations; and if his difficulties and distresses be urgent in the extreme,—yet, by attending to the word of the gospel in humble faith, he shall surely be guided into the way of peace, find effectual assistance in the path of duty, be extricated from all perplexities, made victorious over all enemies, and finally be brought to the enjoyment of eternal felicity. Indeed whenever we mistake our duty or our interest, or whenever we are cast down on any account, it may be said to us, “Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures and forget that “thus it was written, and thus it must be.” We want no other directions or encouragements, than such as are contained in the Bible: nothing can be added to this perfect rule of faith and practice. All that men can do in this matter to good purpose, consists in calling the attention of mankind to the Scriptures, explaining their contents, and exhorting them to believe and obey the divine message; and if any one, whether he be a moralist or philosopher, an inventor of superstitions, or a pretender to new revelations, attempt to add to the Scriptures, or to amend any thing in them; he may be compared to an

optician, who should undertake, by new discoveries, and well constructed glasses, to improve the light of the sun.

Nor is the message of Scripture a vain thing, or *a matter of small importance*: Moses therefore added, “because it is your life.” “Whatsoever a man hath will he give for his life,” is a maxim that is generally found true, though it was once spoken by the father of lies. The merchant throws his rich freight into the sea, when it endangers his life: and the patient rewards the surgeon for performing some torturing operation, when it is necessary to rescue him from death. In ordinary computations life is deemed our highest interest; capital punishment is regarded as the most formidable; and it is an *admired*, though often a proud and rebellious heroism, when a man prefers death to penury, ignominy, or bondage. Yet our Lord hath said, “Fear not them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do; but fear him, who hath power to destroy both body and soul in hell.” And “what is a man profited, if he gain the whole world, and lose his own soul Our temporal life is not principally concerned in the subject before us,—but our future and eternal condition. When Christ declares, “These shall go away into everlasting punishment, hut the righteous into life eternal;” the same original word is used in both clauses: the punishment could not be *eternal*, if the person punished should at length cease to exist; and the strongest expressions of the copious Greek language, that language of speculating philosophers, are used in Scripture to denote the eternity of the punishment, prepared for the wicked in another world. We are not competent to determine what sin deserves, or how it behoves the Governor of the universe to show his abhorrence of it. “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” It is our wisdom to submit to his justice and to seek his mercy, and not to waste our lives in vain disputations concerning matters too deep for our investigation.

We must, however, close this part of the subject in a summary manner. It depends on the reception which we give the message of God, whether we shall for ever enjoy his inestimable favour, or feel the weight of his awful indignation; whether our capacity of reflection, memory, and anticipation, shall be our noblest privilege, or our most aggravated misery; whether we shall bear the holy image of God, or be given up to the unrestrained dominion of every hateful passion; and whether happy angels, or apostate spirits, shall be our companions during our eternal existence. In the meantime, this must also determine, whether in the present life we shall possess that peace of God which passeth all understanding, or resemble the tempestuous waters of the ocean, in the dissatisfied and unsettled state of our minds; whether we shall pass through life with comfort and usefulness, and meet death in joyful hope; or spend our days in vanity and vexation, and at length be driven away into darkness and despair.

The Scriptures certainly require all who would declare the whole counsel of God,” to use this decided language: and whatever plausibility may appear in the reasonings or conjectures of those that become the advocates of the heathen, whom St. Paul declared to be “without excuse it is impossible, consistently with Scripture, to entertain the least hope concerning persons who reject revelation, and prefer their own self-flattering imaginations to the sure testimony of God. It hath therefore been sufficiently shewn, that the subjects of which we treat, as far as we adhere to Scripture, are most certain, necessary, and important; and that, in comparison, all the objects which ambition, avarice, or sensuality pursue, are frivolous as the toys of children, and transient as a dream when one awaketh.

III. Then let us conclude the subject by a practical improvement.

It can scarcely be expected, that they, who avowedly disregard all religion, will trouble themselves to attend to these instructions: otherwise we might very forcibly insist on the folly and madness of their conduct. We would say to such men, do you act upon principle, or do you not? If you answer in the affirmative, you profess yourselves to be atheists, or at least to hold sentiments which are practically equivalent to atheism. But does any one of those frantic enthusiasts, whom you despise, imagine so wild an absurdity as they do, who ascribe this fair creation, in which wise contrivance and boundless goodness emulate each other, to blind chance or necessity; or imagine a Creator, who totally disregards the work of his own hands? But were this absurd principle, which contradicts demonstrable truths, as near to certainty as it is possible, what would you gain by it? Should you at last find yourselves mistaken, your loss would be infinite: should you be right in your notion, you have not the smallest advantage; unless you choose to own, that as *you* spend your lives, it will be an advantage to die like the brutes, and that the atheism of your understandings springs from the depraved affections of your hearts.

But if you allow, that there is a God, who created and governs the world, on whom all are dependent, and to whom all are accountable: how infatuated must you be, to live as if there were none! Never to inquire what your Creator commands or forbids! To be indifferent whether he be pleased or displeased! Wantonly to do those things, against which your consciences protest, as contrary to the will of God! Bestowing no pains to avert his wrath, when you know you have offended him! But wasting your lives in palling sensualities, insipid dissipations, wearisome pursuits, and a constant succession of vain expectations, bitter disappointments, and multiplied crimes, till a hopeless death drops the curtain, and closes the mournful scene.

And are you then entitled, as persons of superior discernment and sagacity, to treat pious Christians with supercilious contempt, as men of weak intellects and disordered minds? When all the instances of credulity and

indiscretion, which the whole company of religious people through all generations have exhibited, bear no manner of proportion to the madness and, folly of an irreligious life.

Supposing however that you do pay some attention to this most important concern: is it not also evident from the subject we have been considering, that you ought to bestow great pains to discover the true religion, and to discriminate it from all others. Numbers are of opinion, that people should adhere to the religion in which they were educated: but does not this imply that they deem all religion a vain end trifling matter? A nation may retain some inconvenient usages, without much censure: but to support unjust and ruinous laws, because their fathers did so, would imply a most unreasonable and detestable obstinacy. Thus some circumstances in religion may perhaps be retained, because they are deemed venerable for their antiquity; but its grand essentials are our life, and we are ruined, if we prefer human tradition to divine revelation. Such an opinion vindicates the Jews in rejecting the gospel, and exculpates those who cried out, “Great is Diana of the Ephesians.” It espouses the cause of Pagans, Mahometans, and Papists; while it condemns prophets, apostles, and zealous reformers: and in short, it considers it criminal to oppose any established error or imposition. But the monstrous deformity of this tenet must be visible, whenever it is brought forth to the light; and we need only exhort every one to consider the subject with application to himself, and to act accordingly. It will then be deemed most *rational* to examine with diligent and impartial care the evidences of divine revelation! and, if the mind be satisfied in this respect; daily to search the Scriptures, with earnest prayer for divine instruction, according to the apostle’s exhortation, “If any man lack wisdom let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not.”—But let it be also remembered, that multitudes study religion as a science, and thus adopt a Scriptural creed, yea, are useful in propagating the truth, who yet are not themselves truly religious. Nay, many have prophesied and wrought miracles, who have been at the same time workers of iniquity. Notions may float in the understanding, when they do not durably affect the heart, or influence the conduct: but unless the truth be an engrafted and sanctifying principle in the soul, it must be “held in unrighteousness;” and such a religion is indeed a vain thing, though vital Christianity is unspeakably valuable and important.

Our Lord requires his disciples to “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.” We should set out in early youth with this most important business: but if we have wasted a great part of our lives already, we should immediately attend to it with proportionable earnestness and industry. We should begin every year, month, week, and day, with this one thing needful; to which the prime of our affections and the best of our hours should be dedicated: and all other pursuits if possible rendered subservient. “Labour not

then,” my friends, “for the meat that perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give you.”

If this be neglected, all is lost, whatever else may seem to succeed: if this be secured, all things will surely turn out to our advantage.

While we therefore call upon you in the name of Christ, to strive to enter in at the “strait gate;” to deny yourselves and bear your cross for his sake; and to beware that no earthly object rival him in your affections: while we warn you, that it is impossible to serve God and Mammon, and remind you that the friendship of the world is enmity with God: or while we endeavour to prevail with you, “to count all things but loss, that you may win Christ, and be found in him—what do we, but inculcate the maxims of heavenly wisdom? Does any prudent man hesitate to renounce an inferior interest, when it comes in competition with a greater, or to neglect some trivial concern, when business of the last importance demands his attention? And who, almost, refuses to part with a right hand, in order to preserve his life? But alas “The children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light.”

The worldly man, having selected his object, gives it the most decided preference; he adopts and persists in the most suitable means of success; he exercises self-denial in various ways, devises new expedients, never loses sight of his main point, and endeavours to render every thing, even religion itself, subservient to his grand design. But how different is the conduct of numbers who profess the gospel! How negligent are they of the means of grace! or how soon weary of attending on them! how trivial a matter serves as an excuse for omission, and how unwilling are they to venture or endure any thing in this momentous concern! Men in general are far more punctual to their commercial engagements, or even to their social appointments, than in the ordinances of God; and did lawyers or physicians study their several subjects, no more than nominal Christians do the Bible; or were the courtier as slack in waiting on his prince, as they are in coming to the throne of grace; how would men exclaim against their folly and inconsistency! Alas! even the true believer may reflect on the conduct of the prudent tradesman, the valiant soldier, and the candidate for royal or popular favour, till he be covered with shame and confusion.

But let us, my brethren,, not yield to this supineness; let us examine the grounds on which we expect eternal life, as a prudent man would look into the title-deeds of a valuable estate. Let us endeavour to convince our children and relatives, by word and deed, that we seek these blessings for them also, as the grand concern: for alas, even where creeds and catechisms are taught, the conversation of the parlour, and the general system of education, often suggest an opposite conclusion. Let us consider, that we make the best use of our talents, and are the best friends to our country, and to mankind, when we most endeavour to promote the interests of true religion. And should we in

this course meet With many discouragements, let us not be weary in well-
doing, for assuredly we shall reap in due season, if we faint not.