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THE  
LIFE AND CHARACTER  
OF  
HEZEKIAH

CONSIDERED  
IN SIX LECTURES,

DELIVERED DURING LENT, 1839.

BY  
WILLIAM NICHOLSON, M.A.

RECTOR OF ST. MAURICE, WINCHESTER.

LONDON:  
J. HATCHARD AND SON, 187, PICCADILLY ;  
JACOB AND JOHNSON, WINCHESTER.  
1839.

THE CALL UPON THE CHURCH,

CONSIDERED IN

TWO ESSAYS,

BY W. ROBERTS, Esq. M.A. AND

REV. W. NICHOLSON, M.A.

ALSO,

THE PRESENCE OF GOD IN HIS  
CHURCH.

A VISITATION SERMON,

PREACHED IN WINCHESTER CATHEDRAL,

BY W. NICHOLSON, M.A.

LONDON :

IBOTSON AND PALMER, PRINTERS, SAVOY STREET, STRAND.

## DEDICATION.

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TO THE  
RIGHT REVEREND CHARLES RICHARD,  
LORD BISHOP OF WINCHESTER.

MY LORD,  
THE following Lectures were prepared solely with a view to the edification of my own parishioners; nor had I the slightest intention of committing them to the press, until requested to do so by several members of my congregation. Their too partial judgment, it may be reasonably thought, scarcely justifies the obtrusion of such a volume upon the public. But, upon consideration, the subject appeared to me to contain matter not only adapted for general instruction, but peculiarly suited to the times in which we live. Hezekiah was a zealous reformer, and the spirit and temper with which he engaged in the work of religious reformation, seem to present a striking contrast to the spirit which,

unhappily, is too characteristic of these latter days. In an age, the tendency of which is rather to destroy than to amend, the example of a holy man and a religious ruler, bending all his energies and influence to the restoration and establishment of institutions, which had either fallen into desuetude, or had lost their efficiency, will to the thoughtful mind suggest lessons neither unprofitable nor unseasonable.

Another motive has had some influence upon my decision. With your Lordship's sanction and liberal assistance, I have been endeavouring to procure the necessary funds for rebuilding my church upon a scale sufficient for the wants of a large and poor population.\* The work has hitherto prospered

\* The parishes of St. Maurice, St. Mary Calendar, and St. Peter Colebrooke, containing a population of more than three thousand souls, are provided with church accommodation for only one-fifth of the inhabitants. The churches, which once belonged to the two latter parishes, have long ceased to exist. The whole district now forms one ministerial charge, with one parish church in an extremely dilapidated condition. Should any profits result from this publication, they will be devoted to the purpose of rebuilding and enlarging the church of St. Maurice.

beyond my expectations; but still there is a deficiency of means, which must be met before the undertaking can be commenced. It has been suggested that the publication of these Lectures may possibly render some assistance towards the accomplishment of this good work.

The avowal of this object will, I am sure, render your Lordship favourably disposed towards this unpretending volume. Deeply interested in the extension of church accommodation and pastoral superintendence throughout your diocese, your Lordship will rejoice with me, if this effort should in any measure be instrumental in promoting an undertaking, in which the spiritual welfare of the largest district of your Lordship's cathedral city is deeply concerned.

I am, my Lord,

Your Lordship's faithful  
and obliged servant,

W. NICHOLSON.

*Winchester,*  
*June 3, 1839.*

# C O N T E N T S.

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## LECTURE I.

### THE REFORMATION.

2 CHRON. xxix. 1, 2.—“ Hezekiah began to reign when he was five-and-twenty years old, and he reigned nine-and-twenty years in Jerusalem. And his mother’s name was Abijah, the daughter of Zachariah. And he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that David his father had done.” . . . *Page 1*

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### THE PASSOVER.

2 CHRON. xxx. 1.—“ And Hezekiah sent to all Israel and Judah, and wrote letters also to Ephraim and Manasseh, that they should come to the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, to keep the passover unto the Lord God of Israel.” . . . . . *27*

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# LECTURES.

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## LECTURE I.

### THE REFORMATION.

2 CHRON. xxix. 1, 2.

“ Hezekiah began to reign when he was five-and-twenty years old, and he reigned nine-and-twenty years in Jerusalem. And his mother’s name was Abijah, the daughter of Zechariah. And he did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that David his father had done.”

To a superficial observer it may seem a remarkable circumstance, that so large a portion of divine revelation should be conveyed in the form of narrative. A book professing to reveal to man the will of his Creator, and to teach him the way of salvation, might be expected to be more of a didactic than of an historical character. And it may

excite surprise to find, that not less than two-thirds of the entire volume are occupied with the histories of nations and families and individuals. But a little reflection will serve to convince us that in this, as well as in all his works, God has chosen the fittest and most effectual means for the accomplishment of his purposes.

For, in the first place, it must be borne in mind, that the Scriptures of the Old Testament are one continuous testimony to the promised Messiah. "Search the Scriptures," said our blessed Lord, "for in them ye think ye have eternal life; and they are they which testify of me." Now the narratives of the Bible are, for the most part, an integral portion of this testimony: the old testament bearing witness to a coming Redeemer—the new to that Redeemer already manifested in the world. No sooner is the record of the creation, and the subsequent events in the early history of mankind, concluded, than we find, as we proceed along the pages of Scripture, a continued series of events, each of which is as intimately con-

nected with Christ as are the successive links of a chain with the last. Upon the promise made to Abraham, that in his seed should all families of the earth be blessed, depends the entire series of the subsequent pages of Scripture. This is the key-note, as it were, which is struck by prophets, evangelists, and apostles.

The records of the children of Abraham, the events of their wondrous history, the succession of their kings, the changes of their political condition, are all essentially necessary to the establishment of the truth—that Christ was He in whom the promises made to Adam and Abraham and Moses and David were fulfilled. So that, according to the plan of mercy by which it was appointed to retrieve the ruin of the fall, it was essentially necessary that a considerable portion at least of divine revelation should be conveyed in the form of narrative.

Again, it has long passed into a proverb, that instruction is far more effectually conveyed by the indirect teaching of a story, than by the most clear and elaborate address

in a didactic form. And it is easy to discover the wisdom of the arrangement, by which God has not only given us precepts and warnings in his word, but has illustrated and enforced them by the cogent influence of example. He sets before us, in the lives and histories of individuals or nations, the duties which he would have us to perform, or the sins which he would have us to avoid. The holy men, whose lives are recorded in Scripture, are set before us as models for imitation; and the wicked and disobedient as beacons to warn us from sin. God points us to the one, and says, "Go, and do thou likewise." He points to the other, and says, "Beware lest ye also fall after their example." "All these things happened unto them for ensamples," says St. Paul, "and they are written for our admonition."\*

The histories of the Bible, moreover, supply some of the most convincing arguments for the truth of Scripture. It is morally impossible that these minute and circumstantial narratives should have been forged by

• 1 Cor. x. 11.

designing impostors. For if so, they would infallibly have carried within them the means of their own detection. Whereas, in innumerable instances, we find the Scripture histories confirmed by collateral and independent evidence: and the more we extend our researches into the records of remote antiquity, the more convincing proofs do we find of the truth and credibility of the word of God.

But I must not occupy your time, my brethren, by extending these preliminary remarks. I am about to invite your attention, during the season of Lent, to a portion of sacred history, scarcely inferior to any in interest or instructiveness. \*The life of a good and holy man, living in times of rebuke and blasphemy—surrounded with political troubles and national disasters—assailed by corruptions from within, and dangers from without—and yet surmounting all his difficulties by firm reliance on his God,† cannot surely be destitute of instruction. And if the Lord be with us in our meditations upon it, and prepare our hearts to receive with meekness the teaching of his word, I doubt not that we shall pass

through the history of Hezekiah with much profit to our souls.

We read nothing of this eminent man until he is introduced to us, on his accession to the throne of Judah. We are not informed of the particular circumstances and events of his childhood and youth. He appears suddenly, at the age of five-and-twenty, on the page of sacred history, a young and zealous and holy man, called to administer the affairs of a great people in critical and perplexing times. One thing, however, we may infer respecting his previous life, that his education was by no means favourable to the nurture and growth of piety. His father Ahaz was a wicked king. Short was his reign, but it was crowded with mischief. Within the period of sixteen years he seems to have done all that a perverse ingenuity could devise, to destroy the pure worship of God, and to let in a flood of idolatry and impiety upon his dominions. Nothing was too holy for his sacrilegious hand. "He walked," we read, "in the ways of the kings of Israel, and made also molten images for Baalim. Moreover he burnt in-

cense in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and burnt his children in the fire, after the abominations of the heathen whom the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel. He sacrificed also and burnt incense in the high places, and on the hills, and under every green tree.”\* And there is a peculiarly awful feature in his character recorded in the same chapter. “In the time of his distress,” says the historian, “did he trespass *yet more against* the Lord.” Affliction and chastisement, so far from bringing him to his senses, only served to harden him in impiety. “For he sacrificed unto the gods of Damascus, which smote him : and said, Because the gods of the kings of Syria help them, therefore will I sacrifice to them, that they may help me. But they were the ruin of him, and of all Israel. And Ahaz gathered together the vessels of the house of God, and cut in pieces the vessels of the house of God, and shut up the doors of the house of the Lord, and he made him altars in every corner of Jerusalem. And in every several city of Judah he made high places to burn incense unto other

\* 2 Chron. xxviii. 2—4.

gods, and provoked to anger the Lord God of his fathers." \* Not content with despising the worship of the true God himself, he forcibly prevented his people from celebrating it, by shutting up the temple of the Lord, and destroying the holy instruments of the service.

Such a man was not likely to encourage the religious education of his children. We may almost certainly conclude that his parental influence would be exerted in an opposite direction. The man who endeavoured to root out the worship of Jehovah from his dominions, would hardly be careful to maintain it in his own family. And there is one very remarkable instance recorded in both the collateral histories. In the chapter before the text, we find the following statement: "Moreover he burnt incense in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and burnt *his children* in the fire, after the abominations of the heathen." † This passage speaks of children in the plural number; but in the second book of Kings ‡ we read thus: "Yea, he made *his son* to pass through the fire." This son, who is particularly mentioned, was in all pro-

\* Ver. 22—25.

† 2 Chron. xxviii. 5.

‡ xvi. 3.



bability Hezekiah himself — the son with whom, as the destined heir to the crown, the historian was especially concerned.

Here, then, was an ominous beginning of Hezekiah's life! Probably one of the first transactions in which he was unconsciously engaged, was the solemn consecration of himself to Moloch, the abomination of the heathen. A child devoted by his parent to the devil! From this period we may reasonably suppose that he would become familiarized with scenes of idolatry and wickedness. Evil precept and evil example would combine to exert their deadly influence upon his young mind, yet plastic, and capable of being moulded by the circumstances of his early education. The pure worship of Jehovah was well-nigh driven from the land. Whichever way he turned, he would see the shrines of idol gods, in the street, the palace, and the temple. Sounds of idol worship would greet his ears, and, it may be, pollute his mind by their unhallowed impurities. Familiarity with such sights and sounds would necessarily tend to imbue him with predilections for ido-

latry. His earliest thoughts and ideas would be associated with it; and we should naturally have expected, that the young prince, thus trained and tutored, would tread in the footsteps of his impious father, and confirm, by his own authority, the evil which he had commenced.

Brethren, some of you are parents, and if you are truly christian parents, you have given many an anxious thought to the subject of your children's education. And often have you asked, with earnest prayer for direction, by what means you might best deal with the opening mind and the tender heart, and train up your beloved ones to holiness and heaven. Learn, then, the danger of familiarizing the infant mind with sin. Keep it from the contagion, yea, as far as may be, even from the very knowledge of sin. Above all things, let not a child learn wickedness by aught that it sees or hears under its parental roof. O, if you would avoid the bitterest pang of remorse which can be felt even in hell, let it not be in the power of a child to say, "I was first taught to neglect the Sabbath, or to utter the wilful

falsehood, or to breathe forth the profane exclamation, by the example of those who should have taught me the way to heaven."

In the case of Hezekiah, however, the expectations which his early education would have justified were not realised. In spite of example, in spite of precept, in spite of all that usually tends to form the character to virtue or vice, he proved an eminently holy man, as remarkable for piety as his father had been for wickedness. How then shall we account for this fact? To what causes shall we attribute the apparent anomaly? It were easy to speculate upon some probable causes. It may be, for all that appears to the contrary, that Hezekiah was blessed with a pious mother, who wept in secret and in silence over the abominations of the land, and the fearful degeneracy of the times. She may have instilled into his mind the lessons of heavenly wisdom, and laid a foundation of holiness which no evil example could afterwards destroy. Many a christian mother, placed by God's providence in the midst of worldliness and dissipation, has trained up her children

in the fear of God, and sowed the seeds of early piety, which by the divine blessing have been ripened and matured, and eventually have brought forth much fruit to his glory. She has watered the seeds which she has sown with the tears of holy affection, and has reaped a rich harvest of joy.

But we need not thus speculate. Hezekiah may have had no friendly guide, no holy instructor; and, in the absence of proof, we may presume that he had not. We are sure that God does not need these instruments, although he generally condescends to use them. We must, after all, resolve the matter into his sovereign grace. It is this, and this alone, which makes one man to differ from another, with regard to his privileges, as well as to his character. It is not education *alone*, or parental training *alone*, or any outward means *alone*, which can make a man religious. We must look beyond these, which are merely instruments in the hands of God, who, for the most part effects his purposes by the use of appointed means. But we must never lose sight of the fundamental truth, that the *grace*

*of God* is the sole producing cause of religion in the heart. We must beware of assigning to the instrument the honour which is due to God alone. Education and admonition and example are means by which He is usually pleased to work ; but in themselves they are weak and ineffectual. Do we not see continually around us practical proofs and illustrations of this truth ? There is the child of religious parents, upon whom has been bestowed many an affectionate warning, for whom many a fervent prayer has been breathed, and many a tear shed, but all apparently in vain. He grows up to disappoint the hopes and wound the hearts of his parents. And, on the contrary, how often do we see, as in the case of Hezekiah, a pious child trained up in the midst of circumstances, apparently most hopelessly unfavourable to the development and growth of religion ! How then shall we account for these facts ? Surely we can only say, "It is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes."

We do not depreciate the outward means of grace ; we only contend that they are not

the *cause* of grace. "Train up your children in the way in which they should go." Teach them, pray for them, control them. Do for them all that a parent's wisdom can devise, or a parent's tenderness perform; but do not claim for education what it is God's prerogative alone to bestow—a *new heart* and a *right spirit*. The grace of God can triumph over all obstacles and all disadvantages, and from the impious home, and idolatrous court, and polluted sanctuary of a wicked Ahaz, can bring forth the holy and ardent and devoted Hezekiah.

The next point in the history which claims our attention, is the conduct of Hezekiah upon coming to the throne of his father. His character is thus briefly summed up in both the histories: "He did that which was right in the sight of the Lord, according to all that David his father had done." The first acts of his reign gave promise of blessed fruits. No sooner did he find himself invested with the sovereign power, than he immediately applied himself to the revival of true religion, and the restoration of the long-neglected ser-

vices of the sanctuary. The zeal with which he set about this work is emphatically marked by the sacred historian.\* “He, in the *first year* of his reign, in the *first month*, opened the doors of the house of the Lord, and repaired them.” In carrying this good work into execution, no time was to be lost. His spirit was stirred within him, when he saw the house of God forsaken and desolate. Its holy walls were defaced and dishonoured by the accumulated dust of years of neglect; its sacred pavement, once trodden by crowds of devout worshippers, was now defiled by uncleanness: its hallowed vessels were broken and decayed. Or, if any portions of the temple had been used, they were even more desecrated by idols and their altars, than by the squalid heaps which polluted the rest of the edifice. Such a state of things was not to be endured for a single day. Such dishonour to God must be put an end to at once. The first act of Hezekiah’s reign, therefore, was to open the doors of the house of God, which, it seems, from long disuse, had

\* 2 Chron. xxix. 3.

fallen into decay. For several years, it is probable, they had never opened to receive a single worshipper of Jehovah. "The holy and beautiful house" was a scene of desolation and corruption.

The work of purification was long and laborious. "Then the Levites," we read, "arose. And they gathered their brethren, and sanctified themselves, and came according to the commandment of the king, by the words of the Lord, to cleanse the house of the Lord. And the priests went into the inner part of the house of the Lord to cleanse it, and brought out all the uncleanness that they found in the temple of the Lord into the court of the house of the Lord. And the Levites took it, to carry it out abroad into the brook Kidron. Now they began on the first day of the first month to sanctify, and on the eighth day of the month came they to the porch of the Lord: so they sanctified the house of the Lord in eight days; and in the sixteenth day of the first month they made an end. Then they went in to Hezekiah the king, and said, We have cleansed all the house of the Lord, and the



altar of burnt-offering, with all the vessels thereof, and the shewbread table, with all the vessels thereof. Moreover, all the vessels, which king Ahaz in his reign did cast away in his transgression, have we prepared and sanctified, and, behold, they are before the altar of the Lord.”\*

But the evil influence of the former reign had affected not merely the holy fabric, but all the ordinances and even the ministers of religion. The Priests and Levites, especially the former, seem to have fallen into a state of extreme coldness and indifference. It could not, in fact, have been otherwise. For if these had fulfilled their duties, they would strenuously have resisted, even unto blood, the contempt put upon religion during the former reign. They would have manfully asserted their sacred dignity and divine commission, and in defiance of the king's displeasure, yea, even of death itself, would have maintained in their integrity the ordinances of religion. They would rather have bowed their necks to the sword, than have tamely submitted to see

\* 2 Chron. xxix. 12—19.

the temple polluted, the altar forsaken, and God dishonoured. O! it is a woful thing for a nation, when a spirit of coldness and servility, and unholy compromise, comes over the ministers of religion; when, to secure the patronage of the great and powerful, or to win the favour of the unthinking multitude, the truth of God is basely surrendered, and the ordinances of his house are suffered to fall into neglect or desuetude. God grant that, in this our favoured land, the priesthood may ever be found faithful to their trust, the bold and fearless assertors of the truth, the uncompromising reprovers of vice and irreligion, whether they be found in the cottage or the palace. May they count neither their ease nor their lives dear unto them, so that they may transmit unimpaired to posterity the precious deposit of the church—"the faith once delivered to the saints!"

There is something at once solemn and affectionate in the manner in which the youthful monarch exhorts the priests and Levites to an energetic discharge of their holy functions: "And he said unto them, Hear

me, ye Levites, sanctify now yourselves, and sanctify the house of the Lord God of your fathers, and carry forth the filthiness out of the holy place. For our fathers have trespassed, and done that which was evil in the eyes of the Lord our God, and have forsaken him, and have turned away their faces from the habitation of the Lord, and turned their backs. Also they have shut up the doors of the porch, and put out the lamps, and have not burnt incense nor offered burnt-offerings in the holy place unto the God of Israel. Wherefore the wrath of the Lord was upon Judah and Jerusalem, and he hath delivered them to trouble, to astonishment, and to hissing, as ye see with your eyes. For lo, our fathers have fallen by the sword, and our sons and our daughters and our wives are in captivity for this. Now it is in mine heart to make a covenant with the Lord God of Israel, that his fierce wrath may turn away from us. My sons, be not now negligent: for the Lord hath chosen you to stand before him, to serve him, and that ye should minister unto him, and burn incense.”\*

\* 2 Chron. xxix. 5—11.

In this latter verse he reminds them of the high dignity with which God had invested them; and uses this as an argument to stir them up to a sense of the importance of the work—"Be not negligent, *for* the Lord hath chosen you."

As soon as the temple had been purified, and all the instruments of worship prepared, Hezekiah hastened to celebrate a solemn service to the Lord of the temple. The sweet savour of burnt-offerings had long been unknown within its walls; the sacred censers had long ceased to send up their wavy clouds of perfume to its roof; the solemn chant had not for long resounded through its courts. But now all was changed. At early dawn the king repaired to the house of the Lord.\* The sin-offering was sacrificed as an atonement for the transgressions of the people, Laying their hands upon the victim's head, they, by that significant action, owned their guilt and their desert of punishment.† The burnt-offering also smoked upon the altar.‡ The voice of praise mingled with these solemn rites: and David's holy melodies, which it is

\* Chron. xxix. 20. † Ib. 21, 22, 23. ‡ Ib. 24 and 27.

our blessed privilege to use in these latter days, were the vehicle by means of which they breathed forth their feelings of joy and gratitude.\* “ They sang praise unto the Lord with the words of David, and of Asaph the seer, and they sang praises with gladness.”† Is it not a pleasing thought, my brethren, that when singing the Psalms of David, we are bearing our part in that sustained chant, which, for almost three thousand years, has hymned forth the praises of the same God and Saviour?

We have been able to do little more than glance at the several actions which marked the auspicious opening of Hezekiah's reign. The whole chapter, from which the text is taken, is well worthy of a thoughtful perusal. One thing, however, must be briefly noticed, which is recorded in the corresponding history.‡ In describing Hezekiah's zeal in reforming religion, the sacred historian details the vigorous measures which he adopted to suppress the prevailing idolatry. “ He removed the high places, and brake the images,

\* 2 Chron. xxix. 25 and 28. † Ib. 30. ‡ 2 Kings xviii. 4

and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces *the brazen serpent* that Moses had made : for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it *Nehushtan*.” Strange that this memorial of the national wickedness and punishment should have been perverted into an object of idolatry ! True, it was a memento of the Lord’s mercy, and, as such, had, doubtless, in the first instance, been devoutly and innocently preserved. But we are led to wonder at the folly and hardness of heart which could induce the children of Israel to burn incense to the symbol of their deliverance, as though it had been their deliverer. Strange indeed was the perversity, but not confined to the Jewish nation. Would that the christian church had never incurred the same guilt ! We may wonder at the folly which paid divine honours to *Nehushtan*—a mere piece of brass, (for such is the meaning of the contemptuous term by which Hezekiah called it ;) but what shall we say of the Church of Rome, with her relics and her images, and her incense smoking before the shrines of her tutelary

saints? The origin of these abuses may have been innocent, or even laudable. Respect for the saints, who had died in the Lord, and a natural reverence for things associated with the great verities of the christian religion, may have been the seeds of practices, which have now degenerated into an idolatry, at least as culpable as that of the Jews, in burning incense to the brazen serpent. But God seems to have recorded this instance of superstition and idolatry, expressly to warn us of the danger of establishing practices, which all experience teaches us may easily become stumbling-blocks and occasions of falling.

Here, brethren, for the present we must pause in the history before us. I will only, in conclusion, offer one remark arising out of the subject which we have just been considering. The zeal of Hezekiah for *religion* strikes us as the most prominent feature in his character. He was very zealous for the Lord of Hosts. We read nothing respecting any great *political* reformation which he undertook—anything, I mean, of a purely *political* character. The

first and almost exclusive object of his solicitude seems to have been, the promotion of pure and undefiled religion amongst his subjects. If civil abuses existed, as doubtless they did exist, he did not first apply himself to remedy these. He did not first endeavour to reform the laws and government of the nation: he began with God and his services, convinced that the surest way of promoting the permanent welfare of a people is to establish true religion amongst them. He knew, that to be a happy people, they must be religious. This was true political wisdom. Would that all statesmen and rulers understood and practised it! Would that they felt a pure Christianity to be the best defence and the chief glory of a nation! Would that the course of legislation were always directed to the promotion and establishment of the truth of God and of his holy church, "the pillar and ground of the truth!" But, alas! it now seems to be a too commonly admitted maxim, that kings and magistrates, as such, have nothing to do with religion—that they step out of their province, and even set themselves in array



against religious liberty, when they use the power and influence, with which God has invested them, in behalf of his church. Can we find anything in Scripture to sanction this delusion? No, brethren; on the contrary, do we not find it continually recorded of the pious kings whose lives are written in the Scriptures, that they exerted all the influence which God had entrusted to them, for the promotion of his glory, and the establishment of true religion? And is it for a moment to be supposed, that while the master of a family, within his smaller range of influence, is required to do all that lies in his power to promote domestic religion, the ruler of a kingdom, in his larger and more influential sphere of action, is to maintain a cold and heartless neutrality?

Brethren, let us never cease to pray, that the rulers of this our favoured land may repudiate this unhallowed maxim, the offspring of a spurious and infidel liberality; that they may ever feel themselves bound, by the most solemn of all obligations, to exert, in God's service, the power and authority which He

has entrusted to their stewardship. Let us implore Him to shed forth abundantly upon them the influences of his Holy Spirit, that they may rule in his fear, and seek his guidance, and act for his glory. O! let us ever join with fervour in that devout and beautiful supplication which the church breathes forth to the King of kings, "that all things may be so ordered and settled, by their endeavours, upon the best and surest foundations, that peace and happiness, truth and justice, religion and piety, may be established amongst us for all generations."

## LECTURE II.

## THE PASSOVER.

2 CHRON. xxx. 1.

“ And Hezekiah sent to all Israel and Judah, and wrote letters also to Ephraim and Manasseh, that they should come to the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, to keep the passover unto the Lord God of Israel.”

IN our last lecture we considered the auspicious opening of Hezekiah's reign, and the zeal with which he applied himself to the reformation of religion throughout his dominions; conduct the more remarkable, on account of the contaminating influence to which he must have been exposed during the period of his early education. Under his fostering care, the temple had been rescued from its long-continued desecration, and “ the holy and beautiful house” was once more a house of prayer, frequented by crowds of devout and joyous worshippers. There was now no

lack of offerings for the service of the Lord. "The burnt-offerings were in abundance, with the fat of the peace-offerings, and the drink-offerings for every burnt-offering. So the service of the house of the Lord was set in order."\* And the pious monarch rejoiced in the blessing which had been bestowed upon his efforts.

National prosperity was the consequence of national religion. We read that "the Lord was with Hezekiah, and he prospered whithersoever he went forth."† A signal blessing rested upon his efforts to promote the glory of God, and indeed upon all his undertakings, whether civil or religious. For fourteen years after his accession to the throne, the God of battles went forth with his armies, and victory attended them. A striking contrast this to the state of Judah during the former reign. Defeat and shame and captivity were then the usual fate of her armaments. "The Lord," we read, "brought Judah low, because of Ahaz king of Israel; for he made Judah naked, and transgressed

\* 2 Chron. xxix. 35.

† 2 Kings xviii. 7.

sore against the Lord.\* And this, we find, was God's usual method of dealing. When pure religion prevailed at home, success attended the national arms abroad. When God was dishonoured, and his house forsaken, and his altars despised, then we find the enemy encroaching upon the borders of the land, and straitening the people on every side. It is most instructive to trace, throughout the successive reigns, the uniform connexion subsisting between the religion and the prosperity of the nation. And surely God has recorded this as an example to ourselves, to remind us that there is no defence so sure as the prevalence of pure and undefiled religion amongst a people. It is not to our brave and loyal armies, nor to our goodly navies; no, nor even to a wise and prudent course of legislation at home, that we are to look for safety and success, but to the favour of the living God.

The next event, in which we find Hezekiah engaged, is the celebration of the *Passover* with circumstances of peculiar pomp and solemnity. It would appear that this sacred

\* 2 Chron. xxviii. 19.

ordinance had often fallen into neglect, probably for years together; or at least that it was often celebrated with much coldness and indifference. In the former reign, when all that was sacred was under an interdict, we may be sure that this did not escape. If celebrated at all, it must have been with much irregularity by some few pious families, who mourned in secret over the lamentable desolation of religion. It was not likely that Hezekiah, so zealous for the honour of his God, so thoroughly in earnest, would allow the most important and solemn rite of the church, commemorative of the most wonderful event in the wonderful history of his forefathers, to remain long in abeyance. It happened, however, that he came to the throne just at the very time—in the very month—when, by the divine appointment, the Passover ought to have been kept. The *fourteenth* day of the *first* month was the day upon which the Lord wrought the deliverance of his people out of Egypt; and that was the day which was fixed for the observance of the solemnity through succeeding generations. Now it would have

been impossible for Hezekiah to celebrate the feast on that day, since the purification of the temple was not completed until the sixteenth day of the month. We read, moreover, that "they could not keep it at that time, because the priests had not sanctified themselves sufficiently, neither had the people gathered themselves together to Jerusalem."\* What then was to be done? Could the divine appointment be set aside or altered to meet the emergency, or should he defer the celebration of the ordinance until another year? Would it not be more offensive in the sight of God to deviate from the strict letter of his commandment, than, under the peculiar circumstances of the case, to omit the celebration altogether? So, perhaps, some would have argued. But Hezekiah thought the matter worthy of serious consideration. He was unwilling to delay so important a service, if by any means it could be accomplished, consistently with the will of God. After due consultation, therefore, with the chief men, the priests perhaps, as well as the civil rulers,† he

\* 2 Chron. xxx. 3.

† Ib. verse 2.

concluded that the Passover should be held in the second month, especially since they found in the law an exception which would seem to justify the alteration. On turning to the Book of Numbers,\* we find that if any individual had contracted pollution, or had been absent on a distant journey, and been thereby prevented from joining with his brethren in the holy ordinance at the appointed time, he was permitted to keep the Passover on the corresponding day of the following month. Here then was a case in some respects resembling the present. The priests and people had not purified either themselves or the temple; and in addition to this, there was no time to summon the inhabitants of the distant towns and villages before the appointed day. It was thought, therefore, that God would be better pleased and more honoured by the celebration of the Passover with some degree of irregularity, than by its entire omission; inasmuch as the matter and spirit of the ordinance must be of more importance than the time of its celebration. They judged rightly, as the sequel showed. God approved

\* ix. 10, 11.



of their pious diligence, and that passover was a season of much spiritual joy and refreshment.

As soon as this resolution had been formed, Hezekiah sent letters without delay, not only to the distant parts of his own dominions, but to all the ten tribes of Israel, then under the government of Hoshea. The passover belonged as much to them as to the two tribes which continued faithful to the family of David. But it was long since they had enjoyed an opportunity of celebrating the ordinance, once delivered to their forefathers. Never, perhaps, since they had revolted from Rehoboam, that is, for a period of about two hundred and fifty years, had it been duly celebrated; for to keep it at Samaria, or at any place except Jerusalem, was expressly forbidden.\*

Mark the spirit of kindness and conciliation, and concern for the spiritual welfare of his brethren, which runs through Hezekiah's invitation.† He was grieved at their destitution of religious privileges, their alienation from the holy house and solemn services of Jerusalem. He felt for their peculiarly dan-

\* See Deut. xvi. 5, 6.

† See ver. 6—9.

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gerous position, cut off as they were from the means of grace, and taught by idolatrous princes to worship the golden calves, which the apostate Jeroboam had set up at Bethel and Dan, for the express purpose of drawing them away from Jerusalem.\* It was, therefore, with more than common earnestness, an earnestness which nothing but a deep concern for their souls could have inspired, that he invited and exhorted the tribes of Israel to come. Brethren, it is a good and blessed sign of the depth and sincerity of our own personal religion, when it makes us care for the souls of others; when the spiritual welfare of our kinsmen—our neighbourhood—our country—ay, of the whole world, lies near to our hearts. It argues a healthy state of mind, when we earnestly desire that others may be partakers of our religious privileges—when we look abroad with compassion upon the millions of our fellow-men, destitute of the blessed ordinances of Christ's church, living in darkness, and dying in despair; buried, it may be, in ignorance and

\* See 1 Kings xii. 26—31.

sensuality and sin, without God and without hope in the world ; and still more, when our compassion does not evaporate in sentimental sorrow and indolent regret, but stirs us up to do what in us lies, to remedy the evil. O ! it is a blessed thing, when, like Hezekiah, we ourselves become instrumental in sending the message of mercy and of grace to the abodes of sin, and in bringing within the green pastures of the church the sheep which were wandering at large in the paths of destruction.

The reception which Hezekiah's message encountered, from some of the ten tribes, but ill accorded with the spirit in which it was sent. It was sent in kindness, it was received with scorn. It was intended for their welfare, it was probably interpreted as an insult. " They laughed the messengers to scorn, and mocked them."\* His earnest pleadings, his affectionate expostulations, his solemn warnings, moved their unholy derision, and they contemptuously rejected both him and his message. When he spoke of " Jerusalem as

\* See ver. 10.

the place where men ought to worship," they would proudly reply, "Our fathers have worshipped in this mountain," why may not we? The sanctuary at Bethel or at Dan was to them as good as the holy place, where God had promised to dwell and meet with his people. The wrath or the mercy of the "Lord God of Abraham and Isaac and Israel" moved them not, for they were equally indifferent to his frown or to his smile. They were, in fact, fast ripening for destruction. A spirit of blindness had seized them; and this contemptuous rejection of proffered mercy was, it may be, the last drop which filled to overflowing their cup of wrath. Before many years had been numbered, these impious men were pining in captivity under the Assyrian yoke.

The invitation of Hezekiah, however, was not universally rejected, even by the tribes of Israel: for we read that "divers of Asher and Manasseh and of Zebulun humbled themselves, and came to Jerusalem."\* Israel must indeed have been in a deplorable state, if none could be found who would listen to such

\* Ver. 11.

an invitation. There were, doubtless, many even then, as there had been in evil times before, who had "not bowed the knee to Baal;" but the main body of worshippers were of *Judah*, who were the subjects of Hezekiah, and would naturally be more under his influence, and more affected by his authority and example. "In Judah the hand of God was to give them one heart to do the commandment of the king and of the princes, by the word of the Lord."\* Amongst them, it appears, a remarkable unanimity prevailed. There was no dissentient voice—no lingering step—no reluctant heart: all was cheerful obedience to the king's command; and, we may conclude also, cordial acquiescence in the proposal. Such an united movement of an entire people, all eager to join in a religious observance, could be nothing else than the result of divine influence. Such is the waywardness of the human heart, that nothing perhaps is more difficult, than to bring the mass of a people to think and feel and act in unison, especially in religious matters. But here we find a

\* Ver. 12.

whole nation, a nation, too, now long accus- to idolatry, and alienated from the true religion, turning by one simultaneous movement to God, in an act of religious worship. This fact would be unaccountable, if we did not know that the God of heaven can control the unruly will of man as easily as he can silence the storm, or bid the ocean be at peace. And this truth, you will observe, the historian endeavours to impress upon our minds— “*The hand of God,*” he observes, “*was to give them one heart.*” He acknowledges that it was the Lord’s doing. It was not the prudent arrangements, or the energetic measures of Hezekiah, which brought about this result ; but it was “because God had prepared the people.” The very *suddenness* of the thing showed that it could be attributed to no management on the part of the king.\* Let us ever remember, brethren, in all great revivals of religion, when multitudes are stirred up to seek the Lord, and the spirit of true religion is shed abroad throughout a parish or a community, and the word of God is anxiously

\* See 2 Chron. xxix. 36.



listened to, and the holy ordinances of the church are frequented by faithful worshippers, that the honour is due to God alone. It is He, who disposes and turns the hearts of men, as it "seemeth best unto his godly wisdom." It is He, "who worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

From Israel and Judah together there was thus assembled a goodly number to keep the passover.\* We have already remarked one irregularity in the celebration of this festival: another and perhaps a more important one followed. It appears that a considerable number of those who attended had not sanctified themselves, that is, they had not purified themselves from some pollution which they might have contracted. "There were many in the congregation that were not sanctified. . . . For a multitude of the people, even many of Ephraim and Manasseh, Issachar and Zebulun, had not cleansed themselves, yet did they eat the passover, otherwise than it was written."† Now, according to the law of Moses, it was strictly enjoined, that none

\* See ver. 13.

† Ver. 17, 18.

should eat of the Passover who were not free from pollution. The touch of a dead body, for instance, would have disqualified a person from joining with his brethren in this ordinance. Whatever might be the nature of the impurity, the person so affected was excluded. And it would have been accounted a profane act, to have dared to mingle with the congregation of the Lord's people in the celebration of this solemnity. Such, however, in the present instance, was the fact; and, under ordinary circumstances, it would doubtless have drawn down upon the offenders some signal mark of the divine displeasure. We can hardly conceive that this was done in contempt of God's authority. We must rather conclude that it was done in *ignorance* or in *haste*. Men had so long been unaccustomed to the service, and both priests and people had fallen into a state of such extreme negligence, that it is by no means improbable that much ignorance prevailed respecting the preparation required. It may have happened, too, that in a multitude so hastily gathered together, but little time could be spared for

ceremonial purifications; and many might have imagined, since no other opportunity would occur in that year of eating the Passover, such as usually occurred when it was celebrated at the proper time, that it would be better to eat it unpurified than not to eat it at all. But whatever may have been the cause, it is obvious that there was *sin* in the matter: there was something which required forgiveness, and something which might justly provoke the displeasure of the Lord. Hezekiah therefore offered up a touching and beautiful prayer in the behalf of the offenders. Hezekiah prayed for them, saying, "The good Lord pardon every one that prepareth his heart to seek God, the Lord God of his fathers, though he be not cleansed according to the purification of the sanctuary."\* He supposed that there might be some amongst them, who had prepared their *hearts* to seek the Lord, who, nevertheless, had not been cleansed after the manner enjoined by the law. With pure and sanctified hearts, they might have some ceremonial uncleanness, which should properly have debarred them

\* Ver. 18, 19.

from the congregation of the Lord. "For this may the good Lord pardon them! May He regard the integrity of their hearts, and the rectitude of their intentions, and be pleased to pardon their omission, and permit them to share in the spiritual blessings, which rightly belong only to those who are cleansed after the purification of the sanctuary." He knew well that God, who "looketh on the heart," sets a higher value upon inward purity than upon outward cleansing.

Much need have we, my brethren, to offer this petition in our own behalf! How much is there requiring pardon even in our holiest services! What prayer do we ever offer, which does not in itself require a prayer for forgiveness? When do we approach the Lord's table, to celebrate the most sacred ordinance of the christian church, in a state of mind so pure and so prepared as not to contract sin? What holy duty do we ever perform, which is so free from blemish as to require no allowance for imperfection? Have we no wandering thoughts, no sinful imaginations, no earthly desires intruding into

our minds in the hours of devotion, and leaving upon our hearts more real pollution than the ceremonial defilement of the Jew? We may congratulate ourselves upon the meritoriousness of our rigid observance of religious duties, but we forget that there is not one of these boasted services which has not upon it the mark of defilement—not one upon which a holy God can look and pronounce it to be pure and perfect. If God should be extreme to mark what is amiss, even in our best actions, we are undone; our very services would seal our condemnation. But O! what an unspeakable comfort is it to the Christian, painfully conscious of his infirmities and unworthiness, to feel that if “his heart be prepared to seek the Lord,” if it be upright and sincere in his service, He will, for Christ’s sake, look with pity and forgiveness upon his manifold deficiencies and corruptions! There may be much coldness, and much weakness, and much unbelief, and much that perhaps may make him tremble for the acceptance of his services; but is it not a thought full of comfort to his soul, that there is at

God's right hand an almighty Advocate, who ever liveth to make intercession for his people! "If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the propitiation for our sins."\*

In the history before us, a mighty sovereign, it is true, but a sinful man, pleaded with God in behalf of his erring brethren, "and the Lord hearkened to him." His intercession prevailed, "and the Lord healed the people." But we, brethren, have a more prevailing advocate, "whom God heareth always;" one who can sympathise with our infirmities—one who loves us with the tenderest love—one who died to save us. Shall not, then, his intercession avail us? Only let us carry our sins and infirmities with penitent hearts to the throne of his grace, lamenting our weakness and unworthiness, and "though we be not cleansed according to the purification of the sanctuary," yet shall the Lord pardon and bless us.

Such was the passover which Hezekiah celebrated. It seems to have been a season of great

\* 1 John ii. 1, 2.

gladness, and, we doubt not, of great spiritual profit. Joy reigned in every heart, and the praises of God were on every tongue. Such a season of refreshing devotion had not been remembered since the days of Solomon.\* Many, indeed, had been the scenes of unholy revelry which had been witnessed at Jerusalem; but such chastened piety, such godly rejoicing, such sober zeal, such spiritual service, had long been unknown. Here, we read, was penitent confession of sins; here was thankful acknowledgment of God's mercies; here was a solemn dedication of themselves to God; here was ample instruction "in the good knowledge of the Lord;" here were psalms of praise; here, in fact, was all that could rejoice and improve the heart;† and, we doubt not, multitudes returned to their homes blessing the God of their fathers, who had put it into the heart of their youthful monarch to restore the long-forsaken ordinances of the Lord's house.

Nothing now remained but that the congregation should receive the parting benediction.‡

\* Ver. 26.

† Ver. 21, 22.

‡ Ver. 27.

This was the usual mode of dismissal amongst the Jews, after all their religious assemblies. The form of the blessing we find recorded in the book of Numbers.\* It was an office peculiarly belonging to the priesthood thus to bless the congregation. In the present instance this was no empty ceremony, no unmeaning form. It was pronounced with sincerity, and it was confirmed in heaven—"Their voice was heard, and their prayer came up to his holy dwelling-place—even unto heaven."† A real blessing, a treasure of spiritual joy and peace, was vouchsafed to the people; and they departed to their homes, not with a priestly benediction only, but with the divine favour resting upon them. We can easily imagine the feelings with which the assembly, thus blessed by Heaven, broke up and separated to their respective habitations. They would carry with them throughout the land a heavenly influence, the sweet fragrance which the devout attendance upon holy ordinances ever leaves upon the heart and life.

And is there not a blessing reserved for us

\* Numb. vi. 23—27.

† Ver. 27.



also, if we are faithful worshippers, in the services of the church? Has she not also a benediction for her solemn assemblies—a benediction, too, which we may hope, like that of Judah, is heard in heaven, and brings down upon many a waiting soul the dew of the divine blessing, to fertilize the heart, and render sacraments and ordinances effectual to our growth in grace? Let us not think lightly of the church's blessing. We are apt, perhaps, to regard it too much as a matter of course; the ordinary method of bringing a religious service to an end, with a due measure of solemnity and decorum. But, my brethren, it is more than this. If duly given, and duly received, it is confirmed in heaven. The tender and parental tone, with which the church dismisses her children from her solemn assemblies, is not without a depth of meaning to the spiritual worshipper. The minister of Christ, in the name of the church, breathes her parting prayer, that “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, may be with us all evermore;” or, that “the peace of God, which

passeth all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord ; and the blessing of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, may be amongst us, and remain with us always." And may we not hope and believe that this voice has been heard, this prayer gone up to God's holy dwelling-place, even unto heaven? And as you have, in deep and solemn silence, responded in your hearts " Amen," and prayed that in very deed the blessing of a triune God may rest upon you, have you not risen from your knees with a comfortable hope, that God has blessed you, and made his word, or his sacraments, a channel of abundant grace to your souls? O! that it may be even so with us this morning ; and while we say, with the priest of old, " The Lord bless you and keep you—the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious unto you—the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace,"—may this prayer be heard in heaven, and you indeed be blessed !

## LECTURE III.

## THE INVASION.

2 CHRONICLES xxxii. 7, 8.

“ Be strong and courageous, be not afraid nor dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that is with him: for there be more with us than with him : with him is an arm of flesh ; but with us is the Lord our God, to help us and to fight our battles.”

THE events, which we have already considered, were all transacted within the first two months of Hezekiah's reign. A reformation of religion, so suddenly begun, and so rapidly accomplished, is probably without a parallel in the history of the world. It is generally a work of extreme difficulty and delay to effect any considerable change in the habits and feelings of a large community ;

and one generation of men, or more, is usually laid in the grave, before the expected result is fully accomplished. In the present instance, the hand of the Lord was plainly discernible in the success which attended Hezekiah's earliest efforts. It could have been no other than an Almighty power, which gave the people "one heart" to support their sovereign in the execution of his pious designs.

The king was well aware, however, that if any deep and lasting effect were to be produced on the public mind, there must be something more than a sudden effort, however zealously or even successfully made. The support of religion must be put upon a secure and permanent footing, or the present favourable appearances would soon pass away with the occasion which called them forth. His next business, therefore, was to establish the reformation which he had so auspiciously begun; and so to order and settle the services of the temple, that there might be some reasonable prospect of permanence in the work which he had commenced. No sooner, therefore, was the Passover finished, and the people, after

destroying the remnants of idolatry, had returned, with the divine blessing, to their respective cities,\* than we find the king zealously engaged in organizing the duties and the maintenance of the priesthood. He was convinced that this was essential to the completion of his reformation. During his father's reign, it is probable that the revenues of the temple, and the tithes and offerings appropriated to the maintenance of the priests, had been either withheld entirely, or alienated to the support of idolatry. He applied himself, therefore, to the task of re-establishing the celebration of divine service on a scale commensurate with its dignity and importance. He assigned to the several courses of the priests their own peculiar duties,\* and made ample provision, out of his royal revenue, for the sacrifices and oblations appointed in the law of Moses. He commanded the people also to bring into the temple their long-neglected tithes and offerings: † “ And as soon as the commandment came abroad, the children of Israel brought

\* See 2 Chron. xxxi. 1.

† Ib. Verses 2, 3, 4.

in abundance the first-fruits of corn, wine, and oil, and honey, and of all the increase of the field; and the tithe of all things brought they in abundantly.\* They did not, it would appear, grudge this portion of their substance to the Lord's service, and complain of the hardship of being taxed for the support of religion and its ministers. They found, that to give to the Lord had no tendency to impoverish them: on the contrary, we read, that "since the people began to bring the offerings into the house of the Lord . . . . the Lord had blessed his people." † Neither did Hezekiah think, with too many political economists of modern days, that public money could be misapplied when consecrated to religious purposes. He knew nothing of that niggard parsimony, which grudges a pittance of a great nation's wealth to the service of the Lord. He reckoned all that he appropriated to holy uses, as so much lent unto his Master in heaven, who would by his blessing upon himself and people return tenfold into their bosom.

\* *Ib.* verse 5.

† Verse 10.

Brethren, I fear that no little guilt belongs to this christian nation, so great, so highly favoured with religious privileges, with regard to the appropriation of its almost incalculable resources. How insignificant a portion of its wealth finds its way into the Lord's treasury ! Time was, when our forefathers gave liberally of their substance to the Lord ; and ten thousand churches reared their heads, through their pious munificence, in our towns and villages ; and a tenth of all the fruits, with which God might bless them and their children, was for ever devoted to the service of him who gave them. But now, while millions are lavished upon folly and luxury and excess, not only do we, as a nation, grudge the smallest mite of our national revenues to the support and extension of religion, but even show no doubtful disposition to alienate from religious purposes what for ages has been devoted to the Lord.

Let us not evade the force of the comparison, by scanning too closely the motives which actuated the men of other days in their costly sacrifices. At any rate, they were re-

ligious motives; and any religious motive, be it mingled with superstition and ignorance, as it may, is immeasurably superior to the low and sordid and ignoble utilitarianism, which seems to be the prevailing motive of modern times. Let us cease to boast of the superiority of the days in which we live, until we can show that pure and scriptural motives can do more than superstition and ignorance were able to accomplish. O that God may not in anger withdraw from us those privileges which we ungratefully despise! May we not be taught their value by their loss!

Fourteen years \* rolled onward, and doubtless Hezekiah, during that time, carried on with success the work which he had thus vigorously commenced. "In every work that he began in the service of the house of God, and in the law, and in the commandments, to seek his God, he *did it with all his heart, and prospered.*" † Energy, and decision, and zeal, were the prominent features of his character. Whatever he did, he did it *heartily.*

\* See 2 Kings xviii. 13.      † 2 Chron. xxxi. 21.



He was not a man to do anything by halves. He took up things zealously, and prosecuted them vigorously, and God prospered him. And this, brethren, is God's usual mode of dealing with his servants. He blesses them, not in indolent neglect of means, but in the zealous and diligent exertion of the powers with which He has entrusted them. Great and noble deeds have never been the offspring of supineness and indifference. Hearty endeavours to serve God are the only endeavours which He usually crowns with success.

But now the time of trial was fast approaching. His life was not destined to be one of uninterrupted peace and prosperity. God was now preparing for him afflictions, which would put his faith to a severe test. Hezekiah soon learnt the lesson, which God teaches to most of us by bitter experience, that through much tribulation his servants must enter into his kingdom. Hitherto, indeed, all things had gone smoothly with him; and he might perhaps have imagined, that it was the will of God that he should glorify Him by the peaceful progress of domestic and

religious improvement amongst his people. He might have expected that, as he had done much, and prayed much for the welfare and peace of Jerusalem, so he should be permitted to see her in uninterrupted prosperity all his life long. But God had otherwise determined. He soon taught him, that unbroken peace belongs not to man's earthly pilgrimage. He taught him, that He is glorified as much by the patient endurance of his people as by their active obedience.

During the early years of Hezekiah's reign, the sounds of war had not been heard in his dominions. The neighbouring country, belonging to the ten revolted tribes, had indeed been subjected, during that time, to all the horrors and devastations of war. The kings of Assyria had wasted their country, and destroyed their cities; and at length, after a protracted siege, had taken Samaria, and carried the inhabitants of the land into captivity. But God had hitherto mercifully warded off these evils from the dominions of Hezekiah; and while the adjoining countries were desolated by hostile armies, his people were dwelling securely in quiet habitations.

Now, at length, troubles began to thicken around him. The invading armies of the Assyrians entered his territories, took some of his strongholds, and threatened even the holy city itself. Alarmed at the impending danger, Hezekiah at first shrank from what appeared to him a hopeless contest. The hosts of Sennacherib, flushed with repeated victories, seemed too mighty to be opposed by the few thousands of Judah. His confidence in God seems to have forsaken him in the critical moment, and he bought off his enemies by the payment of a large ransom—a favour dearly purchased by the sacrilegious plunder of the temple of the Lord.\* This, however, procured only a temporary respite. His faithless enemies, in defiance of promises and engagements, speedily returned, and renewed their demands upon a people, whom they deemed to be lying defenceless and at their mercy. Hezekiah now saw that there was but one course to be pursued. He had tried conciliation in vain; he must therefore prepare to fight the enemies of his country and his God. He must put himself in a posture of

\* 2 Kings xviii. 14—16.

defence; and, in calm reliance upon the aid of an almighty Protector, must withstand the encroachments of the treacherous Assyrian. We read the account of his preparations for defence in the opening verses of this chapter,\* and in them we trace the same promptitude and decision, which appeared so remarkably in his efforts for the reformation of religion.

It would be to little profit to carry you through the details of the narrative, as they are recorded at considerable length in the second book of Kings, and repeated, in the same words, in the 36th and 37th chapters of Isaiah. It may suffice to glance at the leading circumstances, and then to found upon them some reflections, which, by God's blessing, may be profitable for our instruction and encouragement.

The object of Sennacherib seems to have been, to terrify Hezekiah into submission by menaces, rather than to conquer him by force. To this end he sent messages and letters, calculated to magnify his own power, and to pour contempt upon the resources of his opponent. Pride, blasphemy, and false-

\* 2 Chron. xxxii. 3—6.

hood, marked his conduct and his language. He recounts to Hezekiah and his subjects his own and his father's exploits.\* He reminds them of the success which had attended his arms against all other nations and other gods; and argues, if they could not deliver their worshippers, shall "*your* God," your weaker and inferior Deity, "be able to deliver you out of mine hand?" Mark again the horrible blasphemy in the 15th verse. "*How much less* shall your God deliver you out of mine hand?" And not content with venting his proud blasphemies in words, "he wrote also letters to rail on the Lord God of Israel, and to speak against him."†

Here we must pause for a moment, to notice the conduct of Hezekiah on receiving this insulting letter. How did he act under these trying circumstances? Ask yourselves, brethren, how a true servant of God, so situated, would be likely to act? Would he not carry his troubles to a Throne of Grace? Would he not spread his difficulties and per-

\* Verse 13. See also 2 Kings xviii. 20—35; and xix. 10—13.

† Verse 17.

plexities before the Lord, and ask in earnest prayer for direction? So did Hezekiah. He read the blasphemies of the Assyrian, and went up to the house of the Lord, and spread the letter before the Lord. His touching prayer, with the Lord's answer, is recorded at length in the corresponding history.\* That prayer was heard in heaven; and the prophet Isaiah was speedily sent with a message of peace, to assure the king of deliverance.

Brethren, this affliction of Hezekiah, and his conduct under it, is but one out of ten thousand instances of the uniformity of God's gracious dealings with his people. It was no new and strange thing that happened to him, but precisely the process by which God usually trains up his people for heaven. He brings them into straits and difficulties on purpose to try their faith, and call forth their prayers, and bring them to himself, and thus displays and magnifies his own power and grace in their deliverance. Some of you, perhaps, can find a counterpart to this history

\* 2 Kings xix. 15—34.

in your own experience. You have been brought into trouble: afflictions and perplexities have gathered thickly around you, and human help seemed vain. But you have carried your sorrows to the Throne of Grace, in the full assurance that there, and there alone, you could find help. You have said with the Psalmist, "What time I am *afraid*, I will *trust* in thee."\* And God has mercifully granted your deliverance, or, what perhaps was still better for you than speedy deliverance, he has made your troubles the blessed means of promoting your growth in grace and meetness for heaven.

O! how much anxiety and perplexity should we escape, my brethren, if in all our troubles and adversities, instead of vainly disquieting ourselves, we carried them in prayer to our heavenly Father. We are too apt to brood over our sorrows, and contrive and scheme for their removal, instead of calmly committing them to God in prayer, and waiting patiently for his interference in our behalf. Let this conduct of Hezekiah teach us a lesson, which, it may be, most of

\* Psalm lvi. 3.

us have yet learned but imperfectly, if we have learned it at all.

But to return to the history. The prayer of Hezekiah was speedily answered. God did not long delay his promised deliverance. "The triumphing of the wicked is short;" and, in the present instance, it was soon exchanged for shame and destruction. Sennacherib soon learned "whom he had reproached and blasphemed, against whom he had exalted his voice, and lifted up his eyes on high:" it was not against the gods of the heathen, but "the living God," "the Holy One of Israel." The hours of this proud blasphemer and his host were numbered. That very night the angel of the Lord went forth on an errand of vengeance; and the sun, which, as it set, had shone upon a mighty host, glittering in all the pomp and pageantry of martial splendour, looked forth, at his rising, over a scene of awful desolation. The busy hum of myriads of living men was exchanged for the silence of the dead. The Assyrian camp was one vast sepulchre: nearly two hundred thousand men had slept that night to wake no more. Where now were the proud vauntings



of the blasphemer?—where now his contemptuous revilings of the God of Israel? Shorn of his boasted power, he returns with shame to his own land, there to perish by an untimely fate. “ Thus the Lord saved Hezekiah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacharib the king of Assyria, and from the hand of all others, and guided them on every side.” \*

Such, brethren, is a brief sketch of the deliverance which God vouchsafed to his afflicted servant—a deliverance, perhaps, with the exception of that of Israel at the Red Sea, the most signal of any recorded in Scripture. We cannot, I think, turn the narrative to better account, than by directing our thoughts in conclusion to the words of Hezekiah in my text. The circumstances under which they were spoken are thus briefly detailed.† “ And he set captains of war over the people, and gathered them together to him in the street of the gate of the city, and spake comfortably to them, saying, Be strong and courageous, be not afraid nor dismayed for the king of Assyria, nor for all the multitude that is with

\* Verse 22

† Verse 6.

him : for there be more with us than with him : with him is an arm of flesh ; but with us is the Lord our God to help us, and to fight our battles. And the people rested themselves upon the words of Hezekiah king of Judah." These words were immediately addressed to the soldiers whom he had appointed to defend Jerusalem. But to the spiritual reader they are words pregnant with instruction ; words which are capable of an easy application to the circumstances of every Christian in his spiritual warfare. They express, in fact, a general truth, as much belonging to every Christian soldier as to the king of Judah. We actually find this truth asserted by St. John, in words to the same effect as those of the text—" Greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world."\* We may discover, therefore, in Sennacherib and his host no inappropriate emblem of the spiritual enemies of the Christian, and may trace a striking analogy between the dangers and deliverance of Hezekiah and those of ourselves.

I need not tell you, brethren, that as Christians, you are the sworn soldiers of the cross.

\* 1 John iv. 3.

You have entered upon a warfare with enemies more powerful and more terrible than the leaguered hosts which unfurled their banners before the walls of Jerusalem. You are solemnly pledged, pledged by vows the most sacred, and promises the most binding—even by the vows and promises of baptism,—“to fight manfully against the world, the flesh, and the devil.” In allusion to this conflict the apostle declares, “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”\* You see, then, your calling, brethren. As Christians, you are engaged in a momentous struggle. The spirits of darkness are your enemies—the soul is the prize of victory. From the moment of your spiritual birth to the period of your death, this conflict will continue. Dream not of repose and security, from the moment when you first set your faces heavenward, until you plant your footstep upon the borders of that blessed land, where no enemy can assail, and no conflict disturb. It is no dream of the fancy—

\* Ephesians vi 12.

no poetical imagination — that there are actually around us the thronging hosts of spirits of darkness, scowling upon us with malignant eye, and plotting against our souls their schemes of hellish mischief. If our eyes could be opened to behold the unseen realities of spiritual existence, and our ears be unstopped to take in the sounds of spiritual movements, we should behold sights that would appal us, and hear sounds which would fill us with dismay. We should see the atmosphere, in which we move, thronged with the busy ministers of evil, all eager and intent upon the destruction of our souls—a mighty army of malignant spirits, subject to one mightier and more malignant head. Thanks be to God, an impenetrable curtain hides this appalling spectacle from our view. He has, in mercy, hidden from our eyes a sight, which would sink us into despair. But, though unseen, it is as much a reality as the fact of our own existence; and, as christian soldiers, we are as much engaged in conflict with these foes, as the soldier who grapples in deadly strife with his enemy on the battle field.

But, blessed be God, we wrestle not alone. If we have a host of enemies opposed to us, we are assured that we are not left to contend in our own solitary and unassisted weakness. If it were so, the issue of the conflict would not hang in doubt for a moment. But no—“there be *more* with us than with them. With us is the Lord our God, to help us, and to fight our battles.” In other words, the almighty power of God is engaged in the behalf of his servants, for their defence and their victory. And if our enemies be many and mighty, yet, as an old writer has quaintly but forcibly observed, “*One Almighty is more than many mighties.*”<sup>\*</sup> We are exhorted to “be strong,” not in our own might, but “in the Lord, and in the power of his might.” “The Lord of Hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.” The powers of darkness may rage; Satan may put forth his malice, his cunning, and his might, to overpower us; but “if God be with us, who can be against us?” Brethren, there is unspeakable comfort to the Christian

\* Gurnall, “Christian Armour.”

in the thought, that he has more and mightier powers enlisted on his side, than all the crew of evil spirits mustering around to assail him. It might, perhaps, be more than a compensation for the horrors, which a sight of the spiritual world would inspire, if, in addition to the hosts of darkness, which he would behold arrayed against him, he could also see the troops of friendly spirits\* smiling upon him with benignant aspect, and gathering around him in the hour of peril, and warding off the deadly shafts of temptation—an embattled host of “ministering spirits sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation.”

There may seem something visionary in all this, brethren; but I believe it to be a fact, that God thus employs the agency of pure and blessed spirits in the defence of his people. We know not the mysteries of this conflict with the powers of darkness; we see not the strife, nor the combatants, nor the battle field: but scripture warrants us in believing that such a conflict is going on around us; that, while one host of evil spirits is intent

\* Compare 2 Kings vi. 15.—17.

upon our destruction, there are blessed spirits commissioned by the Captain of our salvation, "to help us, and to fight our battles." In the hour of temptation, when our adversary is assailing us with all his malice and all his might, Christ, by the gracious influence of the Holy Ghost, and by his ministering spirits as subordinate agents, is by our side, to strengthen our weakness, to sustain our courage, and in due time to give us the victory. What reason, then, have you to fear, my christian brethren, if the Lord be your helper? The promises of God have engaged his almighty assistance in your behalf, in every time of peril and of need. Clothed in "the whole armour of God, you shall be able to withstand in the evil day." Like the impious Sennacherib, Satan will endeavour, by lying devices, to shake your confidence in God, and lead you to doubt his power or willingness to aid you; for he knows full well, that if your faith fail, you are shorn of your strength, and will become an easy prey. Hence the importance attached in Scripture to *faith*, as a weapon of defence. "Above all, taking the shield of faith, where-

with ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked"—“Whom resist, steadfast in the faith.” Being strong in faith, we shall bring glory to God, and his omnipotence will be engaged for our deliverance. Fear not, therefore, Christian brethren, engaged in this momentous conflict—be not dismayed, for the number or the power of your spiritual foes; more and mightier are they that be with us than they that be with them. The Lord our God is with *us*; and He must first be mastered, before the enemies of his people shall prevail against them. When temptations assail you, and the thought of the conflict alarms you, and a sense of your own weakness makes you shrink with apprehension, remember, there is a third party engaged in the contest, the presence of whom will instantly turn the scale of victory. One earnest prayer will bring to your aid a power which the enemy will be unable to withstand. You shall “be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man.” “He shall give his angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways.” If it were necessary for your



safety, "twelve legions" of friendly spirits should be at your side in the hour of peril. The blessed Spirit, the Comforter, shall be within you; and, secure in the conscious presence of your God, you shall be enabled to take up the psalmist's language of calm and exulting confidence: "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear: though war should rise against me, in this I will be confident."\*

\* Psalm xxvii. 1—3.

## LECTURE IV.

## THE SICKNESS.

2 KINGS XX. 1.

“ In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And the prophet Isaiah, the son of Amos, came to him, and said unto him, Thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order : for thou shalt die, and not live.”

WE are now approaching a very instructive portion of Hezekiah's history. This great and good man is brought down, in the prime of life, to the very verge of the grave, and then, by a miracle of mercy, health is restored to him, and his life is protracted for a season.

A deathbed, brethren, is, in all cases, and under all circumstances, a solemn spectacle. Which of us has not felt its solemnity, when we have leant over the pale form of a departing friend, and watched with trembling anxiety the progress of disease, and the sinking

of exhausted nature? But the deathbed of a true servant of God has in it something more than mere solemnity. It is a spectacle full of holy instruction. To such a scene let me now introduce you. Let us in spirit enter the sick chamber of a dying man; and may God render the scene profitable to our souls.

It is no uncommon thing for the child of God to be found in the lowest depths of affliction. Exemption from suffering forms no part of the earthly inheritance of the saints. *Peace*, indeed, was a legacy which Christ bequeathed with his parting words to his followers; but we mistake, if we suppose this peace to consist in an exemption from trials, rather than in the patient endurance of them. The history before us furnishes an appropriate illustration of this truth. Hezekiah was a devoted servant of God. Since the reign of David, none had served Him so zealously, or done so much to promote his glory, and the good of his people. Now, we might in our ignorance have imagined, that the life of such a man, at any rate, would have been one of uniform and uninterrupted prosperity.

We might have expected, that the especial favour, with which God regarded him, would have shielded him from some of the sorrows which fall to the lot of ordinary men. But far different was the portion which God assigned to his servant. We have already seen him hard beset by troubles: the Assyrian host beleaguering his capital; the impious Sennacherib uttering his insulting blasphemies, and his proud defiance; in a word, destruction impending over him and his kingdom. But this affliction was not enough. Another was nigh at hand. "*In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death.*" It was actually during the continuance of the other trial that this event happened. We may infer this from the expression in the sixth verse, "I will deliver thee and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria; and I will defend this city for mine own sake, and for my servant David's sake." This promise of deliverance would have been unnecessary, if the sickness had occurred after the destruction of the Assyrian host. It is most probable, that it occurred at the time when the enemy was

threatening Jerusalem, and perhaps concentrating his forces for the siege.

This, brethren, is no unusual feature in God's dealings with his people. We are bidden to calculate upon "much tribulation" in entering into the kingdom of God; and the company of the redeemed in heaven is described as consisting of those "who have come out of great tribulation." Not only heavy afflictions, but repeated ones, are often the lot of those whom God loveth. If one trial be not sufficient to humble us, another and another will be sent. If one passage through the fire purge not away our dross, we must enter it again, until we come forth as gold which has been seven times tried. My brethren, if such have been the case with any of you—if accumulated troubles have come upon you—if, like David, you have cried in despair, "All thy waves and thy billows have gone over me," remember the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, "My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord, neither faint when thou art rebuked of him." Remember that this has been the mode in which God has

ever dealt with his people. This has been the process, by which He has prepared myriads of rejoicing spirits in heaven, once sinful like ourselves, for their bright inheritance and their crown of glory. Remember that "whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth." "Our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory." And surely, if a brighter crown, and a nearer place to the throne of God, be the result of these afflictions, where is the Christian who will not bid them thrice welcome?

We are not informed what was the precise nature of Hezekiah's sickness. It was evidently a painful disorder, accompanied by, if not actually arising from, a tumour in the flesh. This we may infer from his mournful complaint recorded by the prophet Isaiah.\* It was moreover in its nature a *mortal* disease; one which, in ordinary cases, issued in the death of the patient; and which, in Hezekiah's case, but for the merciful interposi-

\* Chap. xxxviii. 10—14.

tion of God, would thus have terminated. To all human appearance, no other prospect awaited him, but that, after days of wearisome pain, perhaps of excruciating agony, the grave would open to receive him, and eternity unfold its awful secrets to his view.

The next point in the narrative to be noticed, is the *message* of God to the suffering monarch. "Isaiah the prophet came to him, and said unto him, thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order ; for thou shalt die, and not live." Twice in the course of the preceding history do we find the same prophet sent to Hezekiah as a messenger of peace and deliverance. Now he comes as the angel and minister of death. He had received an express commission from the Lord, and, doubtless, it was with heavy heart and lingering footsteps that he proceeded to deliver his melancholy tidings. The purport of the message was, to bid the king prepare for dissolution, since the disease under which he was suffering was such, that, if not arrested in its progress, it would prove fatal. The

prophet evidently speaks of the nature and tendency of the disease, not of the secret purposes of God, with which he seems to have been unacquainted. The final recovery of Hezekiah was unquestionably predetermined in the counsels of God; and the king himself did not consider the sentence of death to be irreversible, or he would scarcely have pleaded with God for recovery.

The exhortation of the prophet refers primarily to the settlement of his temporal affairs, the affairs of his family and kingdom; which, if not fully arranged, would press heavily on his mind, and disturb the tranquillity of his soul, now, to all human appearance, about to appear in the presence of its Maker. But the words have a wider meaning, and refer to spiritual things as well as to temporal. "Prepare thy soul for its departure; look well to its condition; see that the important interests of eternity are duly provided for; see that thy sins are repented of and pardoned; unburden thy conscience of its guilt; in short, prepare to meet thy God.



Thou art soon to walk through the dark valley of the shadow of death; seek for his rod and his staff to comfort and sustain thee."

Such was the prophet's message. And has such a warning voice, my brethren, never been sounded in our ears? Has God never sent such a messenger to us? He has not, indeed, commissioned a prophet to visit our sick beds, and pronounce such startling words as those of the text. But has he no other messengers? Does he not speak to us by other means than by the voice of men? Yes; every disease that preys upon the human frame—every pain which racks the human body—every grave that we see, and every year that rolls over us—is a messenger of God, as duly commissioned as the prophet of old, to remind us of our mortality. Is there not a solemn voice in every visitation of sickness, which robs the cheek of its healthful glow, and the spirits of their buoyant cheerfulness? Does not every bell, which tolls the departure of a soul to its last account, speak with a significant voice to the living? Do not all the friends, whom we have laid in the grave,

still speak to us from their dark chambers? And is not this the solemn language which they utter? "Set thine house in order: for thou also must soon die, and cease to be numbered amongst the living." But O! how few of us heed this warning voice; or, if we heed it for a moment, how soon do we forget it! Sometimes, indeed, God brings death so near to us, that we cannot help musing upon it. Its tread is heard in our homes, and the voice which it utters is so loud and so distinct, that it forces us to hear it. But it is soon drowned in the whirl of business or of pleasure. It is forgotten, until another messenger is sent, and another warning voice again startles us. Brethren, if our hearts are prepared to heed it, not one day will pass over us, without bringing some faithful monitor to remind us that we are dying sinners in a dying world.

The message of the prophet suggests one passing observation of no trifling importance. God seems, by this incident, to teach us the duty which we owe to our dying friends and relations. He seems to warn us of the folly

and the wickedness of closing the ears of a dying man against the voice, which tells him of his approaching death. This is no imaginary case; I would to God that it were. The last sickness has come upon some impenitent sinner; the cold hand of death is already upon him; the current of life is waxing feeble; the hours of his earthly existence are numbered; and yet his friends, in mistaken fondness, are studiously hiding from him the startling truth. Death is a word forbidden to be uttered in the very chamber where he is already doing his work. And the one object of those round is, as it were, to drop a curtain before the eyes of the expiring sinner, to shut out eternity from his view. Brethren, if there be any cruelty in this world more cruel than another, it is thus to feed a dying man with hopes, which we know can never be realised; and to suffer him to be surprised by the stroke of death before he is aware of its approach. And if there be a curse more loud and deep muttered by a lost spirit in hell, surely it must be upon those, who, by concealing his danger, closed up the avenue

to repentance, and thus became unwittingly the instrument of his perdition.

We now proceed to consider the conduct of Hezekiah upon receiving the prophet's message. "Then he turned his face to the wall, and prayed unto the Lord, saying, I beseech thee, O Lord, remember now how I have walked before thee in truth and with a perfect heart, and have done that which is good in thy sight." There is something extremely affecting in the scene thus simply and naturally described. No sooner does the royal sufferer receive the solemn communication, than he turns away his weary eyes from the world, to hold communion with his God. He felt at this moment, if never before, the utter worthlessness of all earthly things.

O! brethren, what is there which so strips from the world its gilded covering of deceit, and reveals its emptiness and vanity, as the rude hand of death? What is there which so clearly discovers to us the intrinsic value of earthly greatness? Hezekiah felt all this: "He turned his face to the wall and prayed." He endeavoured to forget all but the mes-

sage which he had just received, and the God who had sent it; and, with all the privacy which his sick chamber could afford, he poured out his soul in strong crying and tears before his Maker.

Prayer, we are sure, was no new and unusual thing to Hezekiah. It was not a last resource. It was not like the prayers of too many a dying man, the first genuine and fervent petition that had ever escaped his lips. Prayer had long been a familiar thing to him. We referred, in our last Lecture, to a most beautiful prayer of his, when he carried his difficulties and perplexities to God, and implored direction and deliverance. And whether should he now turn in this his present extremity? To what covert should he fly for refuge, when the pitiless storm of death seemed ready to burst over his head? Where should he seek support, when every earthly staff was breaking beneath him? He knew well that God is a refuge in distress, a very present help in trouble: to him therefore he turned. "If recovery be possible," he thought, "God alone can grant it: if death

be certain, God alone can enable me to meet it in composure and in peace.”

On turning to the words of his prayer, we are surprised to find that they express no definite request. But it is evident, that much is implied which is not expressed. No one can mistake the feelings which dictated the words, or fail to discover the state of his mind when he uttered them. He was at that time unwilling to die ; and he “ wept sore” at the prospect of dying. But why, we naturally ask, should such a feeling exist in the bosom of *such* a man—so holy, so devoted? Was he not ready to die? Had he not these many years faithfully served and honoured God? Had not his life been spent in promoting the cause of true religion? Had he not been very zealous for the Lord of hosts? In short, was he not a godly man? and if so, was not death rather to be desired by him, than deprecated? All these questions we must answer in the affirmative. The language of his prayer was not a vain-glorious boast.\* It was the “ answer of a good conscience ;” it was the testimony of a heart, conscious of

the integrity and uprightness of its motives. It was language arising out of the same feelings as those of St. Paul, when he said, "Our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that in simplicity and godly sincerity . . . . we have had our conversation in the world." He does not boastfully speak of his actions as *meritorious*. He simply appeals to God, as a witness of his *sincerity*. There is nothing in this, inconsistent with the deepest humility and the most entire renunciation of self-righteousness. On the contrary, the man who can say, with a deep feeling of his unworthiness, "God be merciful to me a sinner," may in the same breath appeal to God for the uprightness of his heart before Him. For where simplicity and godly sincerity are wanting, there all is wanting, which constitutes the very idea of a religious character.

Why then was Hezekiah reluctant to die? It could not have been from that dread of death, by which the guilty conscience is appalled. We must look, therefore, for other causes; and several probable reasons at once

suggest themselves for the ardour of his desire for a prolonged life. He was then *childless*. Manasseh, who succeeded him, was not born until three years after this event: he was, therefore, at present without an heir to his throne; and it would seem, that the entail of the promise\* made to David was about to be broken, and that the expected Messiah must of necessity spring from another stem of the root of Jesse. Then, again, we must remember, that his kingdom was threatened by external dangers. He was now engaged in a perilous war. The Assyrian army was ravaging his territories, and he doubtless felt that all his courage and wisdom and faith were required, to direct the affairs of his country in this trying emergency. Perhaps, too, he trembled for the permanence and stability of the reformation which he had effected, if he should be prematurely cut off, and his kingdom left without a recognised head. For all these reasons he might have been desirous of living, for the benefit of his country, and the honour of his God. All

\* Psalm lxxxix. 19—37.



these, I say, *may* have been the feelings of his mind, and may thus account for the excessive sorrow which led a holy man to weep sore at the thought of dying.

But even supposing that no such feelings existed, and that there were no such reasons arising from the state of his family and kingdom, which would render the lengthening of his life an object of such earnest desire, still, I think, there would be no difficulty in accounting for the feelings and conduct described in the narrative. On turning to Psalm xxxix, we find a prayer precisely similar to the one we are considering. "Hear my prayer, O Lord," says the Psalmist, "and give ear unto my cry; hold not thy peace at *my tears*: for I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner, as all my fathers were. O! *spare me a little*, that I may recover strength, before I go hence, and be no more." I am persuaded, my brethren, that this feeling is not unknown to the holiest Christian amongst us. There are times, when, if the messenger of death were sent to us, the prayers and the tears of David and Hezekiah would

be ours. And although, perhaps, we could say with truth, "I am not afraid to die," yet our feelings would rather lead us to cry with earnestness, "O spare me a little!" This was probably the state of Hezekiah's mind. The cares of the world, it may be, had too much engrossed his heart. His thoughts were dissipated, his hopes clouded, his faith wavering, his loins ungirded, his lamp untrimmed; and when the prophet stood by his bedside, the first feeling which crossed his mind would be this: "Spare me, O Lord, a little longer, that I may be in a more suitable posture of expectation—my soul more weaned from the world, my heart more heavenly, my spirit more meet for the inheritance of the saints in light."

The prayer of Hezekiah was answered, and a reprieve was granted. Isaiah had not left the walls of the palace before he was a second time commissioned with a message to the king.\* And hence, brethren, we may learn the wonderful honour, which God puts upon the prayers of his people. Scarcely

\* Verse 4.

had the sorrowful sighing of his afflicted servant been breathed, when He sent back the bearer of the summons of death with a gracious answer to his petition. "Thus saith the Lord, the God of David thy father, I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will heal thee: on the third day thou shalt go up unto the house of the Lord, and I will add unto thy days fifteen years." \* The stern sentence, which seemed to doom him to immediate death, is thus reversed, and he is still "the living to praise" his Deliverer. In three days he was so far recovered, as to go up to the house of the Lord, to return thanks for the mercy which had been so unexpectedly vouchsafed. The song of praise, in which he offered up his thanksgiving, we find recorded by Isaiah. † It is a beautiful ode, descriptive of his experience during the affliction, and his gratitude for deliverance.

There may seem to us, in this instance, something like mutability and change of purpose in the dealing of God with his servant. But we mistake, if we suppose it to

\* Verse 5, 6.

† xxxviii. 9.

have been so. All was the result of God's determinate counsel and foreknowledge. Every step—every circumstance of this transaction was ordered and predetermined by the all-wise God. The sickness, the message, the prayer, the recovery, were all portions of one scheme, links in one chain, and indissolubly connected together. The sickness was appointed to call forth the prayer; the prayer was the appointed means of bringing down the deliverance. God is not, like us, changeful and unstable. All the events of his providence, and all his dealings with his people, are parts of a settled plan, by which he intends to accomplish his purposes of mercy.

One part only of the narrative now remains to be noticed, viz. the wonderful manner in which God condescended to confirm Hezekiah's faith in the promised deliverance. It appears that he asked a sign: "And Hezekiah said unto Isaiah, What shall be the sign that the Lord will heal me, and that I shall go up into the house of the Lord the third day."\* The sign, which God vouch-

\* Ver. 8.

safed to him, was one of the most wonderful events which this world has ever witnessed. The sun, whose apparent motion is so exact and so uniform, that it has ever been deemed the most perfect standard of certainty and regularity, was commanded to pause in his mid-day course, in order to confirm the faith of a frail mortal. The shadow of that unchanging sun, by whose motion men are accustomed to measure the lapse of time, travelled backward on the dial. It is not for us, my brethren, to perplex ourselves by vain inquiries, as to the manner in which this great miracle was accomplished. What matters it for us to know the mode by which God effected it? It is sufficient to be assured that the same Almighty Power, which first impressed their motion upon the heavenly bodies, is able to retard or accelerate it. The same Architect who constructed this wonderful mechanism, can suspend its movements whenever, and for whatever cause, he pleases. It is not, assuredly, a greater effort (so to speak) of Almighty power, to *change* than to *create*. There is something impious in this spirit of captious

philosophy, which attempts to *account* for the miraculous interference of Divine Power with the ordinary course of nature ; as though the *laws* of nature, as they are called, were more unchanging than the God who established them ; in other words, as though God were tied down (so to speak) to certain modes of acting, and could not deviate from them. Beware, brethren, of this impious spirit. Learn to bow with humble submission to the truths of revelation ; and reckon it a sufficient answer to the cavils of a spurious and self-sufficient philosophy, to say, that the same Being which formed can change or destroy at his pleasure. If it were necessary now to confirm the faith of one of God's faithful servants, we are sure that the sun, which is now shedding his meridian splendour upon our world, could, at the divine command, retrace his path in the heavens.

A few practical remarks must now bring this subject to a conclusion. There may be some here present, who, like Hezekiah, have been brought to a bed of sickness, and perhaps of expected death. You deemed that

the grave was opening before you, and eternity soon about to unfold itself to your view. And many, perhaps, were the vows and resolutions which you then made, that the glow of returning health, if granted, should bring with it a holier life and a more devoted heart. Deep and fervent were your prayers, that God would spare you to serve him. But where now are those vows and resolutions and prayers? Have they passed away like the early dew? Are they forgotten and neglected? Of what value, then, is your protracted span of life? Your bodily health has been restored, but your soul has not been healed of its more fearful malady. Would it not have been better to languish out your allotted portion of life with a feeble or diseased body, but with a soul calm and peaceful and rejoicing in God, as a reconciled Father in Christ Jesus, than to be delivered from bodily sufferings, but to be left under the condemnation of unpardoned sin? O! my brethren, it is an awful thing to be visited by the rod of affliction, and, when that rod is removed, to return again to folly.

Again, there may be some to whom affliction has been sanctified and blessed. Sickness came upon you, and found you in carelessness and impenitence and sin. But God made it the means of bringing your wandering souls back to Himself. By it he first taught you to fly to the Saviour. He has now raised you up again to health; but the near prospect of eternity has left an abiding effect upon your souls. Brethren, yours is a most blessed condition, and calls for the loudest song of gratitude and praise. What can you render unto the Lord, for all his benefits? You can take up the language of Hezekiah, and say, "Thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption: for thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back." With David you can say, "Return unto thy rest, O my soul, for the Lord hath dealt bountifully with thee. For thou hast delivered my soul from death, mine eyes from tears, and my feet from falling." "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits: who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases; who re-



deemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with loving-kindness and tender mercies." \*

\* Psalm ciii. 1—3.

## LECTURE V.

## THE TRIAL.

2 CHRON. xxxii. 31.

“Howbeit, in the business of the ambassadors of the princes of Babylon, who sent unto him to inquire of the wonder that was done in the land, God left him, to try him, that he might know all that was in his heart.”

It is with somewhat of a melancholy feeling that the reader passes on from the 24th verse of this chapter to those which immediately follow. The solemn scenes, which we recently contemplated, would lead us to anticipate results which, we are soon disappointed to find, were not realised. A dying man, restored by a miracle to health, would not, we should have thought, have soon forgotten the mercy which he had received. A deliverance so

extraordinary, and accompanied by circumstances so calculated to produce a deep and lasting impression upon the mind, would not, we should have said, be effaced while memory holds her seat, but would exert a powerful influence upon the heart to the last moment of consciousness. Brethren, if we reason thus, we plainly show that we are but novices in the science of the human heart.—we give a convincing proof that we have made but little progress in the most important of all acquisitions, the knowledge of ourselves. That deep and deceitful thing, the heart of man, has been studied to little purpose, if we imagine that solemn and startling events must of necessity produce impressions, which no lapse of time can ever efface. In the history before us there was everything which would justify us in expecting that Hezekiah, after his restoration from the grave, would walk upon earth like the inhabitant of another world. We should have imagined that he would be dead to the world and all its concerns, and live with his thoughts and affections set upon things above, and not

upon things on the earth. The glimpse which, as it were, he had caught of eternity, when his soul stood trembling upon the verge of time, would be enough to make this world to him a thing of nought; and he, at any rate, would know how to appreciate its most precious things, its pomps and splendours and vanities. How humiliating, then, is the incident in his history, which next falls under our notice!

We must refer you to the second book of Kings,\* or to the similar relation given by the prophet Isaiah, for a full account of the circumstances. This event is only glanced at in the chapter from which the text is taken. “But Hezekiah rendered not again according to the benefit done unto him; for his heart was lifted up.” † From a comparison of the several narratives, it would appear that rumours of the miraculous recovery of Hezekiah, and of the sign which God had vouchsafed to him, perhaps, also of his wonderful deliverance from the Assyrian host, had travelled as far as Babylon. The particular object of

\* xx. 12—19.

† xxxii. 25.

inquiry seems to have been the recovery of Hezekiah, with its attendant wonders. For, in the corresponding account given by Isaiah, \* we read, that “ Merodach-Baladan, the son of Baladan, king of Babylon, sent letters and a present to Hezekiah: for he had heard *that he had been sick, and was recovered.*” There seems to have been nothing intended by this visit of the Babylonian ambassadors, but to congratulate Hezekiah upon his merciful deliverance. It was, in fact, a friendly and complimentary embassy; and we should have thought that danger was little likely to occur to him from a matter so innocent in itself, and so justly gratifying to his mind. But those temptations, brethren, are not always most to be dreaded, which assail us most openly and undisguisedly. Satan is too cunning an adversary always to assault the servants of God by direct and palpable solicitations to sin. He knows that this would put them upon their defence, and drive them to a Protector, whose mightier power would baffle and confound him. He generally endeavours to lead

\* xxxix. 1.

them into sin, before they are conscious that they are even in danger. He assails them stealthily by covert approaches; and, under the mask of what is laudable, or at any rate innocent, lures them on in unsuspecting security into evil. So it was in the present instance. Here were strangers come from a far country to congratulate the king upon his happy recovery from a mortal sickness. What more natural than to show them the treasures of his house, and the resources of his kingdom? It was but a due respect to such distinguished guests; an honour, which would seem like an acknowledgment of the favour conferred upon himself by their friendly visit. Could there be the slightest approach to sin in this matter? Thus, it may be, Hezekiah argued; or, perhaps, he never even suspected himself of sin. The frankness, with which he relates his conduct to the prophet, implies no consciousness of having done wrong. "All that is in mine house have they seen: there is nothing among my treasures that I have not shewed them."\* Alas! my brethren,

\* Isaiah xxxix. 4.

how little do we know of the operations of our own hearts! How little are we conscious of the motives which secretly actuate us, and determine our conduct! The human heart is a mysterious thing; who can understand it? It is subject to such wild and wayward impulses, and swayed by such a multitude of diversified and complex motives, that it is a matter of extreme difficulty to detect and trace our actions to the real sources from which they spring. We often give ourselves credit for acting from pure and legitimate motives; whereas, if we searched a little deeper into our hearts, we should find that the really influential and governing motive was entirely different, or even contrary. We are deceived into the belief that we are acting from right principles, because we do not stop to analyse our feelings, and probe the secrecies of our own bosoms.

Such was the case with Hezekiah. He little thought, while he was exhibiting the wealth and glory of his house and kingdom, that he was doing so from motives which would not bear to be examined—motives, which, had he

stopped to examine them, would have made him shrink abashed and humbled before his God. *Pride* was the secret spring which actuated him throughout the whole of this transaction. A selfish and worldly-minded ostentation—a desire of magnifying *himself* rather than God, was the principle of his conduct, and the root of his sin. “His heart was lifted up,” says the historian; and in the following verse he expressly speaks of “the pride of his heart,” \* as the sin for which “Hezekiah humbled himself.” Had he been in a right state of mind, he would rather have thought of showing to his heathen visitors the beauty of holiness, and the blessedness of personal and national religion—he would rather have led them into the courts of the Lord’s house, and there have taught them the secret of Judah’s prosperity, and the source of her security. His aim would have been, to send them away with lofty ideas, not so much of his own greatness and glory, as of the power and goodness and majesty of the living God, the Holy One of Israel, whom he

\* 2 Chron. xxxii. 25, 26.



served ; that these idolaters might return to Babylon, and tell the worshippers of Bel, that the God of Hezekiah was God alone—at once the glory and defence of his Zion. The language of Hezekiah's heart was this, “*My* power, and the might of *mine* hand, have gotten me this wealth,” rather than the more humble but more becoming language, “By the grace of God I am what I am.” In a word, he gave not the glory to God.

Such is a brief sketch of this humiliating circumstance in Hezekiah's history. Hitherto we have discovered in him nothing but noble thoughts, and deeds of patriotic and religious zeal. We have found him, through more than fourteen years of his reign, actuated by the purest desire to promote the glory of God and the welfare of his people. Can it be, then, that this high-minded and religious man could be influenced by feelings so unworthy as the petty pride of a mean and ignoble spirit?—the paltry desire of being thought rich and powerful by idolatrous strangers? Yes, my brethren, God would teach us, by another example, that perfection

is not to be expected in this fallen world. Before Hezekiah is gathered to his fathers, he must afford another instance of human frailty, and add another testimony to the truth of the saying, that "there is not a just man upon earth, that liveth and sinneth not." Had he died at the time when death seemed close at hand, his character would have stood recorded on the pages of Scripture without one blot or one imperfection; and men might have pointed to him as an instance, how high human nature is capable of being raised. But the fall of Hezekiah, by a temptation apparently so trifling, and by a pride so despicable and unworthy of his noble mind, seems to afford a peculiarly emphatic lesson of the weakness of the strongest, and the frailty of the holiest, amongst the children of men. It is written for our admonition; and the voice of warning, which it utters, is this: "Let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall." It bids us walk with a wary step, and a jealous watchfulness, through a world, in which all things may minister occasions of sin to a corrupt and deceitful heart.

God did not let this matter pass unnoticed. He loves his people too well to let them continue in sin, unwarned and unrebuked. In the present instance, the prophet Isaiah is again commissioned to visit his sovereign; not, as heretofore, the messenger of deliverance or of death, but the bearer of a stern rebuke. "Then came Isaiah the prophet unto king Hezekiah, and said unto him, What said these men? and from whence came they unto thee? And Hezekiah said, They are come from a far country, even from Babylon. And he said, What have they seen in thine house? And Hezekiah answered, All the things that are in mine house they have seen: there is nothing among my treasures that I have not shewed them. And Isaiah said unto Hezekiah, Hear the word of the Lord. Behold, the days come, that all that is in thine house, and that which thy fathers have laid up in store unto this day, shall be carried into Babylon: nothing shall be left, saith the Lord. And of thy sons that shall issue from thee, which thou shalt beget, shall they take away; and they shall be

eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.”\*

It is worth while to observe the method which the Lord took to humble his erring servant. His heart had been lifted up with pride on account of his treasures. His punishment springs out of *those very objects*, which had ministered to his pride, and from *that very quarter* whence the temptation had arisen. The treasures which he had ostentatiously displayed shall become a spoil: and the spoilers shall be that very people, whom he had wished to impress with great ideas of his magnificence.

This is a mode, brethren, which God frequently adopts in dealing with his servants. He turns their sins into their punishment, or rather makes their sins the parents of their punishment. There are many striking examples of this in the histories recorded in Scripture. The falsehood and dissimulation of Abraham are the means of bringing his wife into danger.† The treachery of Rebekah and her son Jacob separates them from

\* 2 Kings xx. 14—19.

† Genesis xii. 18.

each other for life. The sin of David is punished by the death of his infant, the offspring and memorial of his guilt. So we often find it to be amongst ourselves. The sinful indulgence of a parent, for instance, towards a wayward child, prepares a scourge for that parent's old age, and is the means of bringing his gray hairs with sorrow to the grave. And how often do we find the objects upon which we most dote and most pride ourselves, become, in the end, the occasions of the sharpest trials?

Hezekiah meekly bowed to the stern decree; his conscience, doubtless, smote him when he heard the prophet's rebuke. If he had never detected the latent motives of his heart before, they now stood clearly revealed before him. He discovered that his breast had been swollen with a pride, as despicable in itself, as it was displeasing in the sight of God; and, overwhelmed with conscious shame, he acknowledged the justice of the sentence which the prophet had pronounced. "Good is the word of the Lord which thou hast

spoken." \* He humbled himself in deep repentance for the pride of his heart, confessing his guilt, and crying unto God for forgiveness. † The threatened judgment was thus for a time deferred, and "the wrath of the Lord came not upon them in the days of Hezekiah." It was some alleviation of his punishment, that it lingered yet for a season. In *his* days, he was assured that "peace and truth" should continue. And although it must have embittered his last moments to remember, that there was an awful cloud of divine judgment impending over his family and country—a cloud of judgment perhaps the more awful, because growing blacker and more ominous as its bursting was delayed; yet it must have administered some consolation to his mind, to think that he, at least, should be gathered in peace to his fathers, and see the good of Jerusalem all the days of his life. The portion of Hezekiah's history, which we have just gone through, might be

\* 2 Kings xx. 19.

† 2 Chron. xxxii. 26.

made the groundwork of much salutary instruction and admonition. I might enlarge upon the ingratitude, and forgetfulness of the Lord's benefits, too prevalent in our thankless hearts — upon the transient nature of religious impressions produced upon the mind by afflictions and the fear of death—upon the pride and vanity of the human heart, and its proneness to that worst of all idolatry, the love of self. But perhaps we shall gather up the most important lessons, if we confine our attention to that remarkable statement contained in my text: "God left him, to try him, that he might know all that was in his heart." These, brethren, are words full of deeply solemn meaning; and, by God's blessing, may afford to every one of us material for much profitable meditation.

"God left him." Such is the historian's brief remark upon the conduct of Hezekiah with reference to the Babylonian ambassadors. But in what sense are we to understand these remarkable words? It was not in *wrath* that God left him, as in the case of Saul, in consequence of some flagrant sin;

for hitherto we have read of no act of disobedience on his part. And, moreover, the leaving him is represented as being antecedent to the sin, and therefore could hardly have been penal or retributive. Neither was it a *total* withdrawal of the favour and mercy of God, for these were never wholly taken from him; or, if overclouded for a season, were speedily restored. But God left him *in mercy*. Yes, brethren, strange as the assertion may seem, we doubt not, that God in mercy withdrew from him, for a season, his restraining and preventing grace, and left him to himself—left him, in his own unassisted weakness, to withstand the brunt of temptation. The dispensation was, in short, *corrective*. But is it possible that this could have been done in *mercy*? Is it not the most awful of all judgments, thus to be deserted, even for a time, by the gracious influence of the Holy Spirit, without whom nothing is holy, and nothing is good, and nothing is strong? Unquestionably, in itself, it is an awful thing to be thus left, even though it be but for a moment. But God brings good out of *real*, as well as



*seeming* evil, and a blessing out of that which, abstractedly considered, is a curse; and thus, in the issue, it may be far better for a man to undergo the evil, in order to the attainment of the resulting benefit, than to be without the evil and the blessing too. Such was the case in the instance before us. God left Hezekiah to himself. He might, if so it had seemed good to Him, have continued his efficacious aid, and, by strength imparted, have prevented him from falling into sin. He might have either warded off the temptation, or given so large a measure of grace, as to enable him to gain the victory. This he usually does to the true believer. But he knows, that it is sometimes far better for the soul's ultimate and eternal welfare, that it should be left for a season to itself. When pride is to be abased, and self-sufficiency humbled, and carelessness awakened, and stubbornness subdued, and the soul, in short, brought into a more healthy and prosperous condition, God adopts the process which I am describing. He leaves that soul to itself;

He withholds from it the grace which He had hitherto vouchsafed, and, by a necessary consequence, He permits it to fall into sin ; and then He makes that very sin the means of restoring health and vigour to the once languishing religion.

We shall, perhaps, understand this better, if we proceed in the description of God's dealing with Hezekiah. "God left him, to *try him*, that he might know all that was in his heart." We have here the particular reason assigned for this conduct. It was to *put him to the test*. This, you are aware, my brethren, is the simple idea conveyed by the word temptation. It is a *trial* or *test* of our character. Not, indeed, that God himself requires any experimental process to be undergone by man, in order to ascertain their characters ; for he sees at once into the secrecies of all hearts. But temptations are tests, to expose and lay open our own hearts to *ourselves*, and to bring out into view the iniquity which lies concealed within them. If we had no trials or temptations, we should

neither know our weakness nor our strength. This design of temptation is evidently implied in the passage under consideration. God left Hezekiah to *try* him, in order to teach him the *knowledge of himself*. It was to discover to him the depths of sin, which lurked within his bosom unseen and unknown even to himself. He therefore placed him in circumstances of temptation and danger; placed him, I say, advisedly, and on purpose. He withheld from him, for a season, the aid of his Spirit, and left him in his own native and unaided weakness. He thus taught him that there were lusts and passions within his heart, which he thought not of; and that he was capable of sins, respecting which perhaps he would before indignantly have exclaimed, "Is thy servant a dog, that I should do this thing?"

Brethren, we know not what is in us, until God teaches us by this painful but salutary process. We never, perhaps, are more grossly deceived, than in the estimate which we form of our own characters. We think ourselves good and upright, and incapable of this or

that sin : but God often practically teaches us, that even the best and holiest of men, if left to themselves, are capable of anything. It matters not what be the sin ; if grace prevent not, who shall dare to say that that sin may not be committed by himself? And God does actually teach us this lesson in our own experience. He *permits* us to fall into sin ; he allows our inward corruption for a time to prevail against us, in order to bring down our proud self-confidence—"to humble us, and to do us good at our latter end." We learn our *weakness* by our *fall*, and are taught the deceitfulness of our hearts by the painful consciousness of actual transgression. We are thus emptied of our presumptuous self-sufficiency ; we are taught to walk more humbly with our God, and to seek, by fervent prayer, either for deliverance from temptation, or for that grace which alone is sufficient to strengthen us to endure it. Thus it was with Hezekiah. By leaving him to himself, God showed him his native weakness. He laid open to him all that was in his heart. Until he was tried, he knew not how proud

and vain a heart he had. But his fall taught him the humiliating fact, that without God's grace he was nothing. He was roused from his false security, and the issue of the whole matter was, in all probability, an increase of holiness. Thus, from a thing in itself intrinsically evil, God mercifully caused a larger amount of benefit to accrue to his tempted and fallen servant, than if the temptation and the fall had both been averted.

Said I not truly then, my brethren, that God in *mercy* left Hezekiah? It was for his soul's health; to promote the growth of humility and faith. Had he never fallen, he had never known his frailty, and his entire dependence upon Divine grace for the existence, as well as the continuance, of all the good that was in him. He had been a singularly useful man, and favoured by God in a most remarkable manner. Pride, therefore, and self-sufficiency, perhaps, were the sins to which his circumstances most exposed him; and these were the very sins which this painful discipline was intended to correct.

I trust, brethren, that the incident which

we have been considering, humiliating as it may be to the pride of our hearts, will leave impressed upon us this one salutary lesson, that it is by the grace of God alone that we can stand. If this lesson be duly learned, we have made no inconsiderable progress in religion. Our strength is to know and feel our weakness. When once we have reached this point, the next step will lead us “to the throne of grace to obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” Nothing but a sense of our weakness will ever teach us the value of prayer; and great need have we, brethren, to breathe with fervour our daily petition, that God would not lead us into temptation; or, if we should be brought into temptation, that he would not leave us to our weakness. Great need have we to cry with the Psalmist, “Hold *thou* me up, and I shall be safe.” That prayer will never come in sincerity from a heart, which has not been taught its helplessness by many a conflict with temptation, and, it may be, by many an humiliating fall. But if it should please God at any time, for wise and merciful purposes,

to leave us to ourselves, let us pray that the trial may produce its intended result—that it may humble us and prove us, “that we may know what is in our hearts.” Then, and then only, shall we be strong, when, deeply conscious of our frailty, we live in daily dependence upon Divine grace, and continually apply to Him, who has said, “My grace is sufficient for you ; for my strength is made perfect in weakness.”

## LECTURE VI.

## THE DEPARTURE.

2 CHRON. xxxii. 33.

“ And Hezekiah slept with his fathers; and they buried him in the chiefest of the sepulchres of the sons of David: and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem did him honour at his death.”

WE have now taken a cursory view of the events in Hezekiah's life, as they are recorded by the inspired historian. Copious as is the narrative of this reign, compared with those of the latter kings of Judah, we have reason to believe that it is little more than a brief summary of the leading transactions in which he was engaged. The life of Hezekiah must have been crowded with events of deep and absorbing interest. The history of such a man, placed on such a commanding eminence, and using all his influence for the promotion of God's glory and his country's welfare, and raising up a fallen and degraded



people from their idolatry, must have afforded ample scope for the pen of the historian; and if it had pleased God to hand down to us a more extended record of his life, we should, doubtless, have derived from it many instructive lessons.

We are now approaching to the conclusion of the history. Fifteen years soon passed away, and the time for Hezekiah's departure was at hand. When scarcely past the prime of life, and probably before he had seen the full development and completion of his schemes of reformation, he was arrested by the stroke of death, and was gathered in peace to his fathers. It is evident that his subjects had learned to appreciate his character and usefulness: and having lived beloved and honoured, he died lamented. Tears of affectionate regret were doubtless shed abundantly over his grave, for "all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem did him honour at his death;" and to show their respect for his memory, we read that "they buried him in the chiefest of the sepulchres of the sons of David." A striking con-

trast this to their treatment of his impious father. "Ahaz slept with his fathers, and they buried him in the city, even in Jerusalem; but they brought him not into the sepulchres of the kings of Israel."\* He was counted unworthy to repose amongst the ashes of his illustrious forefathers. A costly tomb, and a pompous funeral, were, however, it is to be hoped, the least part of the honour which the people did to their departed sovereign. The tears of an entire nation, mourning, as with one heart, for the loss of their prince, not only as a national but also as a domestic and personal calamity—these are a far nobler, though less imposing, testimony of respect and veneration, than the proudest monument which human skill can erect, or the costliest display of funeral pageantry.

When we read of the apparently premature departure of the great and good, whose lives seem to us to be essential to the carrying on of holy and important designs in the world, we are led, perhaps, to regard with wonder the dispensations of God's Providence in their

\* 2 Chron. xxvii. 27.

removal. When we see a man devoted to the service of God, and actively and successfully employed in promoting His glory, we naturally expect that He will long preserve a life so valuable, and suffer it to reach at least the ordinary limit of man's earthly existence. But God not unfrequently teaches us, in this as well as in other things, that his thoughts are not as our thoughts, nor his ways as our ways. "His way is in the sea, and his path in the great waters, and his footsteps are not known."\* He often summons from their labours his most devoted servants, at the very time when those labours are most abundant, and, to the eye of sense, most indispensable. There may be much that is inscrutable to human reason in such dispensations; but one thing at least, it is clear, he wishes to be impressed upon our minds, that he stands in no need of an arm of flesh to work his purposes, and carry out his designs. In the present instance, we certainly should have deemed the continuance of Hezekiah's

\* Psalm lxxvii. 19.

life a matter of momentous importance to the welfare of his people, and to the establishment of true religion in the land. And when we find him, at the age of fifty-four, summoned from his beneficial labours to his reward, we feel that, however blessed the removal might be to himself, it could not be regarded as otherwise than disastrous to his people at large. We think that one so useful could be ill spared from the world, and we are almost tempted to say, that He, who holds "the key of death," had opened the door too prematurely for his servant. But all this, my brethren, is carnal reasoning: it is the reasoning of beings, whose dim vision can see no further than the objects which are passing immediately before them. Until we can send forward a long and piercing glance down the vista of futurity—until we can trace events to their remotest and yet undeveloped consequences, we are not qualified even to form an opinion respecting the bearings of God's providential dispensations; and when we see holy men, or faithful ministers, or pious sovereigns, sinking, as we vainly imagine, into an

untimely grave, and their usefulness cut short, when most promising, and the fruit of their labours apparently scattered to the winds, let us not prejudge the matter, but patiently wait for a future day, which will clear up all difficulties, and remove every cloud from the dealings of God. In the mean time, we can only answer the questions of a too curious mind in the language of meek submission, "Even so, Father, for so it seemeth good in thy sight."

The subject of death, my brethren, which is brought before us this morning, in closing the history of Hezekiah, suggests a crowd of important and awakening considerations. There is nothing indeed peculiar in the narrative before us; no incidents are related respecting the last moments of the pious king of Judah; no words which he uttered are recorded; none, indeed, of those circumstances which, had they been preserved, might have made his deathbed a memorable and instructive scene to posterity. We simply read the bare fact of his decease and burial. Doubtless we may infer, in the absence of anything that appears to the contrary, that a life so

singularly useful ended in a blessed and a peaceful death. Such is God's usual mode of dealing with his servants. "Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright; for the end of that man is peace."\*

I need not occupy your time by reflections, in which I shall be anticipated by every serious mind. Living as we do in a dying world, and surrounded by dying men, the subject of death is one which is continually thrusting itself upon our notice. It is true, indeed, that obvious and unavoidable as are the lessons which it teaches, and calculated to send conviction to the most thoughtless heart, yet those lessons are, for the most part, unheeded. Men know that they must die, but they do not *consider* the fact. They are convinced that they *ought* to prepare for death; but they contrive, by some means or other, to escape the consequences of this conviction, and live as if death were a thing with which they had as little to do as an angel in heaven. If men would but allow themselves to consider, they could not but be impressed.

\* Psalm xxxvii. 37.

But the truth is, that they will not face the thought of their own death—they will not grapple with the undeniable fact that they *must* die, and the obvious inference, that they *ought* to be prepared to die. By a perverse and self-destroying infatuation, they blind their eyes to these facts, and determine to allow them to produce as little influence as possible upon their hearts and conduct. But I will not run into details upon this deeply solemn subject; especially as it fell under consideration in connexion with a previous part of the history.

I said, that in the narrative before us there is nothing recorded except the bare fact of Hezekiah's death. One circumstance, however, we must not forget, which distinguished it from the death of ordinary men. He had once already looked death in the face. He had, as it were, almost encountered the king of terrors—he had already stood upon the very brink of eternity—had felt, and thought, and acted like a dying man. But God had mercifully spared him, and given a distinct intimation that his life should be extended for a definite period. Now this

fact introduces a new and peculiar feature into the case before us. Hezekiah was thereby placed under circumstances entirely different from the ordinary circumstances of mankind. He was assured, with a distinctness which admitted no doubt, that the span of his earthly existence should be protracted just fifteen years, neither more nor less — so that he knew for certain the period when he should be called to meet the last enemy. He could calculate with exactness the year, perhaps the very day, when he should cease to be an inhabitant of this world. This, we know, (whether to be desired or not, I stop not now to inquire) falls not usually to the lot of mankind. It seldom happens that men are certified that their days are numbered, any considerable time before the period of their actual death. There are some diseases, indeed, which afford grounds for a minute calculation of the days and hours of life which may elapse before the spirit is released. There are cases, when a violent death is certainly appointed to take place at a given moment by the decree of justice; and the condemned



criminal is assured, that at that moment his life will be required of him, as a satisfaction to the outraged laws of his country; and as hour after hour passes away, he can count with exactness the diminished span which remains. But these are extraordinary cases. For wise reasons God has hidden from man the precise period of his death. An impenetrable cloud of uncertainty hangs over it, and hides it from his view. He may pry with curious gaze into the mists of futurity, but in vain; he knows not what shall be on the morrow; he knows not whether the next moment may not be his last: life, he knows, must soon come to an end; and this is the entire amount of his knowledge. Whether days, or months, or years, yet remain to run their course, he cannot tell. In the case of Hezekiah, however, we have a deviation from the established rule. Doubtless God had wise reasons for communicating this information to his servant. What those reasons were, we presume not to determine: for equally wise reasons, we are sure, that in ordinary cases he wraps up this knowledge in impenetrable

secrecy. It is easy to see, that if men knew precisely the number of their days, they would by no means be so favourably situated as at present for the formation of a religious character, and the exercise of religious affections. One evil consequence is sufficiently obvious ; they would, for the most part, put off preparation to the last—they would take their fill of pleasure as long as they could or dared.—they would make their assurance of life for a certain period the ground for a careless continuance in sin. Repentance would be deferred to the latest moment which they might think compatible with safety; and at last they would fly for refuge to some of those lying devices which Satan has invented for lulling the troubled conscience into a false security. Yes, my brethren, God has wisely—mercifully, drawn a veil of awful secrecy over his counsels, respecting the term of our earthly pilgrimage. He has consulted our good as well as our comfort in this arrangement; and we may safely reckon it as a great proof of God's loving-kindness as well as of his wisdom, that he permits us not to

pierce the cloud which hides the awful future from our view. Much as we may long to forestall the events of to-morrow, and to be assured that we shall live for a fixed and definite time, such knowledge is mercifully placed beyond our reach. The possession of it, we may be sure, would prove most detrimental to the health, as well as the peace, of our souls. Our ignorance in this matter is the best preservative against presumption, and the most prevailing motive to habitual preparedness for death. Take away this ignorance, and what motive have I to habitual watchfulness and sobriety?—what security against presumptuous delay? Supposing, for example, that I knew that twenty years of my life were yet to be numbered before my appointed time should come, and that, until that determined period arrived, no shaft of death should strike me, no untimely accident befall me, no fell disease lay me low—Why, then, may I not “eat, drink, and be merry?” Why may I not give the reins to my pleasures, and indulge my unholy lusts, and walk according to my own ways? It will be time enough to

repent, when the sands of life are just running out.

The fact is, my brethren, that even with the *uncertainty* which now hangs over the period of their death, men actually do argue and act in this way. Repentance is now, in ten thousand instances, deferred in the hope, the mere uncertain, unfounded hope, that death *may* possibly be yet far distant.

Men are continually staking their salvation upon the bare probability that they may haply live yet a little longer. How much more, then, would they linger and procrastinate, if they were certified that any given time would be allotted to them? The work of seeking salvation, by humble penitence and lively faith in Christ, would be deferred from month to month, and from year to year; and life would run on, and habits of sin become inveterate, and the heart become hardened and callous. Threatenings would not rouse; invitations would not soften it. "There is time enough yet," would be deemed a satisfactory answer to the accusations of an uneasy conscience, and the warnings of the word of God. Thus

the issue of the whole would be, that souls would be confirmed in rebellion against God, and the gate of salvation be made more strait and more difficult to be entered. O! no, my brethren, it would not be well for us to obtain this knowledge. And, God be thanked, we have it not: think not that, if you possessed it, you would possess any increased facility for attaining salvation; you have already the most startling motive—the motive most calculated to work effectually upon your heart: you know that you *must* die—you know not *when* the day of death may come: come indeed it must, but come it may, this very year—this very day. We all know that the hope of a lengthened life can never rest upon any solid foundation. We can foretell many events with wonderful exactness—we can predict the precise moment when the sun or the moon shall be eclipsed, if time should roll on for ten thousand years to come. But by no calculation can we arrive at any certainty as to the period when God shall say to any one of us, “Thy soul is required of thee.” The king of terrors baffles all attempts

to hear his approach. He comes with stealthy tread, "like a thief in the night." Of one thing only are we certain, that he will surely come, and that soon. We know not whether it shall be in the bloom and joyousness of youth, in the vigour and energy of manhood, or in the worn-out weakness and decrepitude of old age: whether by the slow but certain ravages of consumption, the rapid desolation of a fever, or by the untimely accident of a sudden and violent death. We know none of these things;—not one of us has a right to imagine that there is more than a step between him and death. It is presumptuous to leave this fact out of our calculation, when we are scheming for the future. O! my brethren, it is sufficient knowledge for us to know that we must die; and if this do not lead us to apply our hearts unto wisdom, it may be more than doubted whether we should be persuaded by knowing *when* we shall die.

Upon the whole, then, we may safely conclude, that by ignorance in this matter we are placed in a far more favourable position with regard to our salvation, than we should be by

a more extended knowledge—that we have now the strongest and most stirring motives to habitual preparation, that our present circumstances admit of.

But ignorant as *we* are of the term of life which may be allotted us, there is One, to whom all the circumstances of our departure are perfectly known. There is One, who “holds the keys of hell and death.” All is under the wise and merciful control of the Lord of life. It is a most cheering and consolatory thought to the Christian, that his Saviour determines all the circumstances and details of the deaths as well as the lives of his people. “Precious in the sight of the Lord,” says the Psalmist, “is the death of his saints.”\* It is too important a matter to take place at a venture. There is nothing casual, nothing unprovided for, nothing unappointed, in the passage of a true believer to his heavenly Father’s home. The time, the place, the manner, the disease, all the minutest circumstances of the deathbed of a true child of God, are wisely and mercifully ar-

\* Psalm cxvi. 15.

ranged. It takes place at the fittest time and in the best manner.

Christian brethren, does the fear of death keep you in bondage? Do you shrink from the thought of approaching dissolution? Do the dread accompaniments of a dying bed appal you—the pain, the conflict, the sinking of exhausted nature? Remember, all these are under your Saviour's wise and merciful control. Can you not leave yourselves in his hands, assured that he will sustain and strengthen you? The Christian dies not alone. With him is the unseen but felt presence of an Almighty Saviour. When he passes through the valley of the shadow of death, he need fear no evil; for the rod and the staff of his God support him. Christ has once trodden that dreary road alone: He had none to comfort and sustain him. But Christ's followers are assured that his presence shall go with them. And if he be with them, the darkness shall be light about them; and a ray of heaven's own glory shall gleam along their path.

But in the case of some of you, my bre-



thren, perhaps the fear of death assumes another form. The pain and the conflict, it may be, are to you no objects of alarm and disquietude. You shrink not from the thought of approaching dissolution, on account of any circumstances of gloom or suffering which usually attend the article of death. It is the *eternity* which lies beyond the grave which makes you tremble. You are appalled at the thought of entering that dark unknown, along the course of whose interminable ages the eye in vain attempts to travel. You cannot—your heart tells you that you cannot, look forward with a hope of glory, which becomes brighter and stronger as the time of its fruition draws nearer. You cannot sympathise with the eager anticipations of St. Paul in the prospect of departure. If, like him, you felt secure of a crown of glory laid up for you in heaven, you could bid death welcome. But doubts and misgivings assail you, and you feel that conscience would refuse its assent, were you to say that thoughts of death were to you thoughts of happiness and peace.

These doubts may or may not be unfounded. It is not impossible that your fears may be needless; and that if your souls were this day required of you, they would be found rejoicing in the mansions of the blessed. A sense of your exceeding sinfulness leads you to question the safety of your condition, and the utmost you can venture to affirm of yourselves is this, that you have a trembling, doubting hope that all will be well with you at last. Such a state of mind as this is not unfrequently the source of painful disquietude to the sincere but desponding Christian. He has too much acquaintance with the spirituality of religion, and the extensive requirements of God's law, to be easily satisfied with his own attainments; and, at the same time, he has too limited a view of the rich provisions made in the gospel of Christ for the sinner's pardon and acceptance, to appropriate to himself its privileges, and delight himself in its fulness. His conscience is too thoroughly awakened to be satisfied with a hollow and deceitful peace, while his faith is too weak

to lay hold of the blessed promises revealed for the comfort of the spiritual mourner. Thus to him the thought of death is associated with something that is dark and uncertain. He knows, indeed, that when "the earthly house of this tabernacle is dissolved, there is a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens;" but he cannot feel assured that a mansion is prepared for himself. And while he sees many around him, "rejoicing in hope of the glory of God,"

"Content to live, but not afraid to die;"

the language of his heart is this, "O that such blessedness were mine!"

My brethren, if such there be within these walls, we bid you to turn away your thoughts from your dark and gloomy musings upon your own sinful hearts to the cross of your Redeemer; we bid you, not indeed to think less of your sins, but ever to think of them in connexion with your Saviour's blood,—to think of them as pardoned and washed away.

While with morbid scrutiny you are scanning the sinful motions of an earthly mind and a corrupted heart, it is little to be wondered at that peace should be a stranger to your bosoms. Lift up your eyes to the cross, gaze with admiring thankfulness upon the ample provision of pardon there made for a lost world. Death will lose its sting to you, if you can realise the fact that you yourselves have a personal interest in the salvation which Christ accomplished.

But it must not be forgotten, that those doubts may not be unfounded. You may have good reason to shrink from the thought of death. It may be, that the weighty affairs of eternity are really unprovided for. It may be, that you are indeed unprepared to die. Sin may still be unrepented of, and unfor-saken. The world may still be the object of your devoted idolatry. Amidst the multitude of objects in which you are interested, the one thing needful may as yet have received a small share of your regard. Christ may not yet be "in you, the hope of glory."

In a word, the solemn truth may be this, "Ye are yet in your sins."

Brethren, never, never will you be able to meet death with joy and peace and confidence, until your characters have undergone an entire change; until the care of your souls has become the one prominent and absorbing object of your solicitude. Never will you be able to welcome his approach until you have sought and found pardon. The only position in the wide world, from which a sinner can contemplate death with satisfaction, is the cross of Christ. Viewed from thence, he comes not arrayed in terrors, a spectral form of grim and fearful majesty; but he comes as an angel of peace and mercy—a welcome messenger to the weary captive, telling him that his bonds are loosed, and his spirit free to mount upward on eagles' wings to his Father's house, "to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge

of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant."\*

\* Heb. xii. 22—24.

THE END.

LONDON :  
PRINTED BY IBOTSON AND PALMER, SAVOY STREET.