

SERMONS

25003

ON

IMPORTANT SUBJECTS,

BY THE LATE REVEREND AND PIOUS

SAMUEL DAVIES, A. M.

Sometime President of the College in New-Jersey.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

THE FIFTH EDITION.

TO WHICH ARE NOW ADDED,

THREE OCCASIONAL SERMONS,

NOT INCLUDED IN THE FORMER EDITIONS;

MEMOIRS AND CHARACTER OF THE AUTHOR;

AND

TWO SERMONS ON OCCASION OF HIS DEATH,

By the Rev. Drs. Gibbons and Finley.

V O L. I.

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S E R M O N I.

The divine Authority and Sufficiency of the Christian Religion.

LUKE xvi. 27—31. *Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house, for I have five brethren, that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them bear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham, but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they bear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.*

WHAT Micah said superstitiously, when he was robbed of his idols, *ye have taken away my gods; and what have I more?* (Judg. xviii. 24.) may be truly spoken with regard to the religion of Jesus, If that be taken from us, what have we more? *If the foundations be destroyed, what shall the righteous do?* Psal. xi. 3. The generality of you owe all your hopes of a glorious immortality to this heaven-born religion, and you make it the rule of your faith and practice; confident that in so doing you please God.

But what if after all you should be mistaken? what if the religion of Jesus should be an imposture?—I know you are struck with horror at the thought, and perhaps alarmed at my making so shocking a supposition. But this suspicion, horrid as it is, has probably been suggested to you at times by infernal agency; this suspicion may at times have risen in your minds in their wanton and licentious excursions, or from the false alarms of a melancholy and timorous imagination:

tion: and if this suspicion has never been raised in you by the sophistical conversation of loose wits and affected rationalists, it has been owing to your happy retirement from the polite world, where infidelity makes extensive conquests, under the specious name of Deism. Since therefore you are subject to an assault from such a suspicion, when you may not be armed ready to repel it, let me this day start it from its ambush, that I may try the force of a few arguments upon it, and furnish you with weapons to conquer it.

Let me also tell you, that *that* faith in the christian religion which proceeds from insufficient or bad principles, is but little better than infidelity. If you believe the christian religion to be divine, because you hardly care whether it be true or false, being utterly unconcerned about religion in any shape, and therefore never examining the matter;—If you believe it true, because you have been educated in it; because your parents or ministers have told you so; or because it is the religion of your country; if these are the only grounds of your faith, it is not such a faith as constitutes you true christians; for upon the very same grounds you would have been Mahometans in Turkey, disciples of Confucius in China, or worshippers of the devil among the Indians, if it had been your unhappy lot to be born in those countries: for a Mahometan, or a Chinese, or an Indian, can assign these grounds for his faith. Surely, I need not tell you, that the grounds of a mistaken belief in an imposture, are not a sufficient foundation for a saving faith in a divine revelation. I am afraid there are many such implicit believers among us, who are in the right only by chance: and these lie a prey to every temptation, and may be turned out of the way of truth by every wind of doctrine. It is therefore necessary to teach them the grounds of the christian religion, both to prevent their seduction, and to give them a rational and well-grounded faith, instead of that which is only blind and accidental.

Nay, such of us as have the clearest conviction of this important truth, had need to have it inculcated upon us, that we may be more and more impressed with it; for the influence of christianity upon our hearts and lives will be proportioned to the realizing, affecting persuasion of its truth and certainty in our understandings.

If I can prove that christianity answers all the ends of a religion from God;—if I can prove that it is attended with sufficient attestations;—if I can prove that no sufficient objections can be offered against it;—and that men have no reason at all to desire another; but that if this proves ineffectual for their reformation and salvation, there is no ground to hope that any other would prove successful:—I say, if I can prove these things, then the point in debate is carried, and we must all embrace the religion of Jesus as certainly true.—These things are asserted or implied in my text, with respect to the scriptures then extant, *Moses and the prophets.*

My text is a parabolical dialogue between *Abraham* and one of his wretched posterity, once rioting in the luxuries of high life, but now tormented in infernal flames.

We read of his brethren in his father's house. Among these probably his estate was divided upon his decease; from whence we may infer that he had no children; for had he had any, it would have been more natural to represent him as solicitous for their reformation by a messenger from the dead, than for that of his brothers. He seems therefore, like some of our unhappy modern rakes, just to have come to his estate, and to have abandoned himself to such a course of debaucheries as soon shattered his constitution, and brought him down to the grave, and alas! to hell, in the bloom of life, when they were far from his thoughts. May this be a warning to all of his age and circumstances!

L.

Whether,

Whether, from some remaining affection to his brethren, or (which is more likely) from a fear that they who had shared with him in sin would increase his torment, should they descend to him in the infernal prison, he is solicitous that Lazarus might be sent as an apostle from the dead to warn them. His petition is to this purpose: "Since no request in my own favour can be granted; since I cannot obtain the poor favour of a drop of water to cool my flaming tongue, let me at least make one request in behalf of those that are as yet in the land of hope, and not beyond the reach of mercy. In my father's house I have five brethren, gay, thoughtless, young creatures, who are now rioting in those riches I was forced to leave, who interred my mouldering corpse in state, little apprehensive of the doom of my immortal part; who are now treading the same enchanting paths of pleasure I walked in; and will, unless reclaimed, soon descend, like me, thoughtless and unprepared, into these doleful regions: I therefore pray, that thou wouldest send Lazarus to alarm them in their wild career, with an account of my dreadful doom, and inform them of the reality and importance of everlasting happiness and misery, that they may reform, and so avoid this place of torment, whence I can never escape."

Abraham's answer may be thus paraphrased: "If thy brothers perish, it will not be for want of means; they enjoy the sacred scriptures of the Old Testament, written by *Moses and the prophets*; and these are sufficient to inform them of necessary truths to regulate their practice, and particularly to warn them of everlasting punishment! Let them therefore hear and regard, study and obey, those writings; for they need no further means for their salvation.

To this the wretched creature replies, "Nay, father Abraham, these means will not avail; I enjoyed them all; and yet here I am, a lost soul; and I am afraid they will have as little effect upon them as they had upon me. These means are common and familiar,

liar, and therefore disregarded. But if one arose from the dead; if an apostle from the invisible world was sent to them, to declare as an eye-witness the great things he has seen, surely they would repent. The novelty and terror of the apparition would alarm them. Their senses would be struck with so unusual a messenger, and they would be convinced of the reality of eternal things; therefore I must renew my request; send Lazarus to them in all the pomp of heavenly splendor; Lazarus whom they once knew in so abject a condition, and whom they will therefore the more regard, when they see him appear in all his present glory."

Thus the miserable creature pleads (and it is natural for us to wish for other means, when those we have enjoyed are ineffectual, though it should be through our own neglect); but, alas! he pleads in vain.

Abraham continues inexorable, and gives a very good reason for his denial: "If they pay no regard to the writings of *Moses and the prophets*, the standing revelation God has left in his church, it would be to no purpose to give them another: they would not be persuaded though one rose from the dead; the same disposition that renders them deaf to such messengers as *Moses and the prophets*, would also render them impersuadable by a messenger from the dead. Such a one might strike them with a panic, but it would soon be over, and then they would return to their usual round of pleasures; they would presently think the apparition was but the creature of their own imagination, or some unaccountable illusion of their senses. If one arose from the dead, he could but declare the same things substantially with *Moses and the prophets*; and he could not speak with greater authority, or give better credentials than they; and therefore they who are not benefited by these standing means, must be given up as desperate; and God, for very good reasons, will not multiply new revelations to them."

This

This answer of Abraham was exemplified when another Lazarus was raised from the dead in the very sight of the Jews, and Christ burst the bands of death, and gave them incontestible evidences of his resurrection; and yet after all they were not persuaded, but persisted in invincible infidelity.

This parable was spoken before any part of the New Testament was written, and added to the sacred canon; and if it might be then asserted, that the standing revelation of God's will was sufficient, and that it was needless to demand farther, then much more may it be asserted now, when the canon of the scriptures is completed, and we have received so much additional light from the New Testament. We have not only *Moses and the prophets*, but we have also Christ, who is a messenger from the dead, and his apostles; and therefore, surely "if we do not hear them, neither would we be persuaded, though one arose from the dead." The gospel is the last effort of the grace of God with a guilty world; and if this has no effect upon us, our disease is incurable that refuses to be healed.

I cannot insist upon all the important truths contained in this copious text, but only design,

I. To shew the sufficiency of the standing revelation of God's will in the scriptures, to bring men to repentance: and,

II. To expose the vanity and unreasonableness of the objections against this revelation, and of demanding another.

I. I am to shew the sufficiency of the standing revelation in the scriptures to bring men to repentance.

If the scriptures give us sufficient instructions in matters of faith, and sufficient directions in matters of practice,—if they are attended with sufficient evidences for our faith,—and produce sufficient excitements to influence our practice, then they contain a sufficient revelation; for it is for these purposes we need a revelation, and a revelation that answers these purposes

has the directest tendency to make us truly religious, and bring us to an happy immortality. But that the revelation in the scriptures (particularly in the New Testament, which I shall more immediately consider as being the immediate foundation of Christianity) is sufficient for all these purposes, will be evident from an induction of particulars.

1. The scriptures give us sufficient instructions what we should believe, or are a sufficient rule of faith.

Religion cannot subsist without right notions of God and divine things; and entire ignorance or mistakes in its fundamental articles, must be destructive of its nature; and therefore a divine revelation must be a collection of rays of light, a system of divine knowledge;—and such we find the christian revelation to be, as contained in the sacred writings.

In the scriptures we find the faint discoveries of natural reason illustrated, its uncertain conjectures determined, and its mistakes corrected; so that christianity includes natural religion in the greatest perfection. But it does not rest here; it brings to light things which *eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither the heart of man conceived*, 1 Corinth. ii. 9.—things, which our feeble reason could never have discovered without the help of a supernatural revelation; and which yet are of the utmost importance for us to know.

In the scriptures we have the clearest and most majestic account of the nature and perfections of the Deity, and of his being the Creator, Ruler, and Benefactor of the universe; to whom therefore all reasonable beings are under infinite obligations.

In the scriptures we have an account of the present state of human nature, as degenerate, and a more rational and easy account of the manner of its apostasy, than could ever be given by the light of nature.

In the scriptures too (which wound but to cure) we have the welcome account of a method of recovery from the ruins of our apostasy, through the mediation of the Son of God; there we have the assurance which

which we could find no where else, that God is reconcilable, and willing to pardon penitents upon the account of the obedience and sufferings of Christ. There all our anxious enquiries, *Wherewith shall I come before the Lord? or bow myself before the most high God? shall I come before him with burnt-offerings?* &c. Micah vi. 6, 7, are satisfactorily answered; and there the agonizing conscience can obtain relief, which might have sought it in vain among all the other religions in the world.

In the scriptures also, eternity and the invisible worlds are laid open to our view; and “life and immortality are brought to light by the gospel;” about which the heathen sages, after all their enquiries, laboured under uneasy suspicions. There we are assured of the state of future rewards and punishments, according to our conduct in this state of probation; and the nature, perfection, and duration of the happiness and misery, are described with as much accuracy as are necessary to engage us to seek the one and shun the other.

I particularize these doctrines of Christianity as a specimen, or as so many general heads, to which many others may be reduced; not intending a complete enumeration, which would lead me far beyond the bounds of one sermon; and for which my whole life is not sufficient. I therefore proceed to add,

2. The holy scriptures give us complete directions in matters of practice, or are a sufficient rule of life.

A divine revelation must not be calculated merely to amuse us, and gratify our curiosity with sublime and refined notions and speculations, but adapted to direct and regulate our practice, and render us better as well as wiser.

Accordingly, the sacred writings give us a complete system of practical religion and morality. There, not only all the duties of natural religion are inculcated, but several important duties; as love to our enemies, humility, &c. are clearly discovered; which the feeble
light

light of reason in the heathen moralists did either not perceive at all, or but very faintly. In short, there we are informed of our duties towards God, towards our neighbours, and towards ourselves. The scriptures are full of particular injunctions and directions to particular duties, lest we should not be sagacious enough to infer them from general rules; and sometimes all these duties are summed up in some short maxim, or general rule; which we may easily remember, and always carry about with us. Such a noble summary is that which Christ has given us of the whole moral law; "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, &c. and thy neighbour as thyself." Or that all-comprehending rule of our conduct towards one another, "Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye the same unto them."

What recommends these doctrinal instructions and practical directions is, that they are plain and obvious to common sense. It is as much the concern of the illiterate and vulgar to be religious, as of the few endowed with an exalted and philosophic genius; and consequently, whatever difficulties may be in a revelation to exercise the latter, yet all necessary matters of faith and practice must be delivered in a plain manner, level to the capacities of the former; otherwise it would be no revelation at all to them who stand in most need of it. Accordingly the religion of Jesus, though it has mysteries equal and infinitely superior to the largest capacity, yet in its necessary articles is intelligible to all ranks who apply themselves with proper diligence to the perusal of them: and I dare affirm, that a man of common sense, with the assistance of the sacred scriptures, can form a better system of religion and morality than the wisest philosopher, with all his abilities and learning, can form without this help. This I dare affirm, because it has been put to trial, and attested by matter of fact; for whoever is acquainted with the writings of the ancient heathen philosophers, cannot but be convinced, that, amidst all their
learning

learning and study, amidst all their shining thoughts and refined speculations, they had not such just notions of God and his perfections, of the most acceptable way of worshipping him, of the duties of morality, and of a future state, as any common christian among us has learned from the scriptures, without any uncommon natural parts, without extensive learning, and without such painful study and close application as the heathen moralists were forced to use to make their less perfect discoveries. In this sense the least in the kingdom of heaven, *i. e.* any common christian, is greater than all the Socrateses, the Platos, the Ciceros, and the Senecas of antiquity; as one that is of a weak sight can see more clearly by the help of day-light, than the clearest eye can without it.

And by whom was this vast treasury of knowledge laid up to enrich the world? by whom were these matchless writings composed, which furnish us with a system of religion and morality so much more plain, so much more perfect, than all the famous sages of antiquity could frame? Why, to our astonishment, they were composed by a company of fishermen, or persons not much superior; by persons generally without any liberal education; persons who had not devoted their lives to intellectual improvement; persons of no extraordinary natural parts, and who had not travelled, like the ancient philosophers, to gather up fragments of knowledge in different countries, but who lived in Judea, a country where learning was but little cultivated, in comparison of Greece and Rome. These were the most accomplished teachers of mankind that ever appeared in the world. And can this be accounted for, without acknowledging their inspiration from heaven? If human reason could have made such discoveries, surely it would have made them by those in whom it was improved to the greatest perfection, and not by a company of ignorant mechanics.

The persons themselves declare that they had not made these discoveries, but were taught them immediately

