

S E R M O N

CONTAINING

REFLECTIONS ON THE

*SOLAR ECLIPSE,*

WHICH APPEARED ON JUNE 16, 1806.

DELIVERED

ON THE LORD'S DAY FOLLOWING.

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## AMOS, VIII. 9.

*It shall come to pass in that day, saith the Lord, that I will cause the sun to go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in the clear day.*

**A**MOS was bred an husbandman and a shepherd. From his rural employment he was called to the office of a prophet. He says, "I was not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet; but I was an herdsman and a gatherer of sycamore fruit. And the Lord took me, as I followed the flock, and said unto me, go, prophesy unto my people Israel."

Many expressions in his book are taken from observations, which a shepherd would naturally make in attending to the business of his calling. In Judea the shepherds watched their flocks, not by day only, but also by night, to guard them against beasts of prey, in which that country abounded. And, in their attendance on their flocks, they would naturally observe the motions of the planets, and the appearances in the heavens, that they might foresee changes of weather and approaching storms. Hence the prophet, calling on the degenerate tribes of Israel to renounce their false gods, and to worship the great author and governor of nature, uses a language suggested by his former pastoral occupation. "Seek not Bethel, enter not into Gilgal, nor pass to Beersheba," the idolatrous places, where the sun and moon, and hosts of heaven were worshipped; "but seek him, who maketh the seven stars and Orion; and turneth the shadow of death into the morning, and maketh the day dark with night."

The stated course of nature, the order of the heavenly bodies, the vicissitude of day and night, and the

regular succession of seasons, demonstrate the existence and providence, the wisdom, power and goodness of God. "Day unto day uttereth speech; night unto night sheweth forth knowledge." "God hath not left himself without witness, in that he giveth rain and fruitful seasons, and filleth our hearts with food and gladness." But common appearances, as they become more familiar, are less impressive. Unusual phenomena, though no less the effects of natural causes, more powerfully arrest the attention, and more deeply affect the mind. The prophet, therefore, predicting some dire calamities on the house of Israel, alludes to an unusual and solemn appearance in the skies, which probably they had lately seen; a total eclipse of the sun in the midst of a clear day. "Thus saith the Lord, I will cause the sun to go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in the clear day." The phenomenon which we beheld, on Monday last, will naturally lead us to understand these words, as a poetic description of a solar eclipse.

Archbishop Usher, in his annals of the world, says, That in Amos's time, there were two remarkable eclipses of the sun, which happened at solemn festivals, and struck the people with great consternation. In ancient times, when astronomy was but imperfectly understood, eclipses were by many considered, as preternatural and portentous. The prophet, therefore, foretelling the judgments coming on the land of Israel, might with great propriety figure to them the changes soon to take place in their political hemisphere, by an allusion to the change, which they had seen, with terror and amazement, in the natural hemisphere. "God would cause their sun to go down at noon, darken the earth in the clear day, turn their feasts into mourning, and their songs into lamentation, and bring up sackcloth on all loins."

The use, which the prophet makes of a solar eclipse will justify us in some moral and religious reflections on the singular scene, which was exhibited in the past week.

1. We have reason to rejoice in the progress, which has been made in the sciences, and particularly in the noble science of astronomy. By this we are freed from many superstitious terrors, which, in the dark ages of the world, tormented mankind.

Eclipses have been observed from the remotest antiquity ; and of those which were most remarkable, accounts have been transmitted to us by some of the earliest historians, who have also related the disastrous events which followed, and which the eclipses were supposed to portend.

The *cause* of eclipses must have been known long before they could be the subjects of mathematical calculation. It was well understood, many ages ago, that an eclipse of the moon was caused by its passing through the shadow of the earth, when the earth was between that and the sun ; and that an eclipse of the sun was caused by the moon's passing between us and the sun, and intercepting its light. This knowledge, however, was not common to the vulgar ; nor did the more learned view these causes as operating by regular and stated laws.

There were predictions of some eclipses, which appeared several centuries before the birth of our saviour. But these predictions were probably, like the present predictions of comets, conjectures grounded on a course of observations, and not the result of exact calculations.

The relations, distances and motions of the heavenly bodies are now so well ascertained, that accurate calculations can be made of all the eclipses, which shall be in ages to come, and of those which have been, since our system was framed. These calculations are of great utility to mankind, in husbandry, navigation, geography, chronology and history. The credit of some ancient histories derives confirmation from this source. The historian relates some great events, which he supposes, were portended by a certain eclipse, which he describes. The astronomer finds, that there

was in fact, such an eclipse, at such a time, and hence justly gives more full credit to the historian.

These phenomena have also their *moral* uses. They enlarge our views of the works of God, and of the grandeur and extent of his creation and providence. They display his wisdom, power and goodness, and his continual agency in the government of the world. They teach us his constant care for the creatures, which he has made, and call us to reverence and adore him, who thus manifests himself to us in the works of his hands.

We see innumerable worlds rolling around us at vast but various distances ; with different, but inconceivable rapidity. These all perform their motions with regularity, and observe their times with exactness. They obey their destination, they keep their order, they never interfere. Shall we not fear the power, admire the wisdom, adore the goodness of that being, who made and adjusted, who sustains and directs such a stupendous system, and renders it subservient to our happiness? These rational sentiments are pleasant and delightful in themselves ; and are far more conducive to piety and virtue, than the terrors of that superstitious ignorance, which views every comet flaming in the sky, every obscuration of the sun at noon-day, every failure of the full orb'd moon at night, every unusual noise bursting from the clouds, every strange appearance in the heavens and in the earth, as awfully portentous of some dire, but unknown calamity.

Superstitious terrors may operate as a temporary restraint from vice. But when the dreaded calamity is delayed, the restraint ceases, and vice regains its dominion. A rational fear of God, arising from a calm contemplation of his agency and government, displayed in his works, and taught in his word, will have a steady and permanent influence. " Fear ye not me, saith the Lord, will ye not tremble at my presence, who have placed the sand for the bound of the sea, who give the former and the latter rain, and reserve

to you the appointed weeks of harvest ?” The more just are our thoughts of God’s government, and the more rational our reverence of his majesty, the more uniform and cheerful will be our obedience to his will.

2. An eclipse of the sun, though it is not an omen of any particular calamity, yet may properly lead us to contemplate the gloomy changes which await us in this guilty and mortal state.

By a total obscuration of this glorious luminary, at noon, in a clear day, a gloom is suddenly spread over the face of nature. Not only the human mind, but the animal and material creation is deeply affected. Night seems to anticipate the time of its return. The stars hang out their lamps ; the dews descend on the earth ; the grazing beasts forget their hunger ; the fowls hasten to their resting places ; the bird of night chants his evening ditty ; every thing wears a sober and mournful aspect.

Here is an emblem of declining age and approaching death.

The time is coming—to some of us it is near ; when the sun and the light will be darkened ; the eyes, which look out at the windows, will be bedimmed, surrounding objects will be hidden, and “ we shall go to our long home—to the land of darkness and the shadow of death, without any order, and where the light is as darkness.”

“ While we have the light, let us walk in the light, lest darkness come upon us. Let us give glory to God, before he cause darkness, and before our feet stumble on the dark mountains ; lest, while we look for light, it be turned into the shadow of death.” The eyes of our understanding still remain unextinguished, and the sun of righteousness shines upon us with salvation in his beams. Let us attend to the glorious discoveries which are made to us, and apply ourselves to the momentous work before us. Let us work while it is day. The time is short—night is at hand. What we

find to do, let us do it with our might. There is no work in the grave.

Some of you are in youth and in full strength. My friends, your morning sun shines bright and pleasant ; you think your day will be long. But, oh ! flatter not yourselves. Your sun may go down at noon, and your prospect be darkened in a clear day. Employ these morning hours in the work of your salvation. You know not what a day, or an hour may bring forth.

The darkness of an eclipse the prophet improves, though not as an omen, yet as an emblem of national judgments. He warns his people that a metaphorical and political darkness may overspread their country, in the same surprizing manner, as literal darkness in a solar eclipse falls on the unsuspecting earth. " Thus saith the Lord unto me, An end is come upon my people ; I will not pass by them any more. Hear this, ye that swallow up the needy, and that say, when will the new moon be gone, that we may sell corn, and the sabbath, that we may set forth wheat ? The Lord hath sworn by the excellency of Jacob, Surely I will not forget any of their works. Shall not the land tremble for this, and every one mourn that dwelleth therein ? Thus saith the Lord, I will darken the earth in the clear day. I will turn their feasts into mourning, and their songs into lamentation."

Sudden darkness caused by eclipses, clouds, vapours and storms, is, in the prophetic writings, a common figure for great and unexpected plagues ; such as war, discord, pestilence and famine. The prophet Isaiah, describing the calamitous state of the Jews, on the invasion of the Chaldeans, says, " They shall look to the earth, and behold, trouble and darkness, and dimness of anguish ; they shall be driven into darkness." In the same figurative language, Joel describes the devastation and famine caused in the land by clouds of devouring locusts, and by the rage of subsequent fires. " Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble ; for the day of the Lord cometh and is nigh at hand ; a day of darkness and gloominess, of clouds

and thick darkness. There shall be wonders in the heavens and in the earth; there shall be pillars of smoke, and the sun shall be turned into darkness.”

When we see the sun darkened in the heavens, and the earth covered with a gloom, we are reminded, how easy it is for Him, who in a moment extinguishes the sun, to cast a cloud over our earthly prospects; to turn our joys into anguish, our confidence into terror, and our songs into lamentation—to subvert our national security, to let loose the infernal spirit of discord, to remove restraint from hostile nations, to send a blast on the labours of our hands, and to spread among us pestilence and death.

On God we are dependent not only for the daily visits of the sun, but also for his friendly beams, when he returns. The moon, which chases away the gloom of night, now and then steps in, and intercepts the light of day. If it should make a stand in that position, our day would become night, and the warmth of summer would be changed into the frost of winter. But the moon obeys the divine command, moves forward in its course, and gives us again the cheering beams, which it had, for a few moments withholden.

The creatures, which are our ordinary comforts, may, by God's direction or permission, become the occasions of affliction and anguish. The sun, which enlivens the rational, animal and vegetable world, may dart malignant fires and scatter pestilential diseases. The rains, which refresh and fructify our fields, may “wash away the things which grow out of the earth, and destroy the hope of man.” The friends, in whom we confide may become our tormentors, and “a man's foes may be those of his own household.” Government, which is our defence against injustice, fraud and violence, falling into the hands of cruel and unprincipled men, may be made an instrument of oppression and misery. “They who lead us may cause us to err, and destroy the way of our paths.”

Where then is our security? It is in the protection of Him, who created and upholds the frame of nature, “who made and guides the seven stars and Orion,

turns the shadow of death into the morning, or makes the day dark with night—who calleth to the waters and sends them on the earth, and restrains the floods” within the bounds prescribed—who rules the raging of the sea, and stills the tumults of the people”—“ who turns the hearts of men, as the rivers of water are turned”—“ who causes the wrath of men to praise him, and the remainder of that wrath he restrains.” How shall we enjoy his protection? He has told us, “ If ye will walk in my statutes, keep my sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary, then I will give you rain in due season, your fields shall yield their increase ; I will give peace in your land, and ye shall lie down and none shall make you afraid.”—“ But if ye will walk contrary unto me, I will walk contrary unto you, and make your plagues wonderful.”

Learned astronomers can calculate with exactness the times when, the places where, and the quantities in which the luminaries of heaven will be eclipsed ; but they cannot with the same accuracy predict the judgments of God. Nor do we here need their astronomical skill. There are other signs by which we may discern impending judgments. Our saviour has taught us a kind of moral astronomy to direct our prescience of such events. The prevalence of infidelity, immorality and vice as surely indicates approaching calamities, as clouds indicate a shower, winds forebode a storm, or the conjunction, or opposition of the sun and moon, in certain places in the heavens, presignify an eclipse. He said to the people, “ When ye see a cloud rise out of the west, straitway, ye say, There cometh a shower ; and so it is. When ye perceive the south wind blow, ye say, There will be heat ; and it cometh to pass. Ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky and of the earth ; but how is it, that ye cannot discern this time ? Yea, and why even of yourselves judge ye not what is right ?” The blindness and stupidity of the ancient Jews to the impending judgments of God, the prophet upbraids by referring them to the sagacity and discernment apparent in the fowls of heaven. “ The stork in the heavens knoweth her appointed time ; the turtle, the crane and the swallow observe the time of their coming ; but my people knoweth not the judgments of God.”

There are now, as there were in former times, many who ask, "Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?" And the watchman's answer then, is seasonable now, "If ye will enquire, enquire ye" wisely; "return, come," return to God by repentance; then come and enquire, and you may hope for a favorable answer.

It is common for people to look forward and enquire, what will be our national state in future years—what will be the result of certain public measures—what shall be done to obtain this favorite object, and avert that threatening evil, and to make future times better than these? But they enquire not wisely concerning this matter. Let them enquire what iniquities abound, and what share their own iniquities have in the common guilt? Let each one repent of his own wickedness, and apply himself to his own duty. Let each one use his best influence to correct the errors, and reform the manners of those with whom he is connected. Then things will go well. "Righteousness will exalt a nation: sin will be a reproach to any people."

3. The darkening of the earth in a clear day brings to mind the *final judgment*.

The scripture assures us, that "God has appointed a day, in which he will judge the world in righteousness, and render to every man according to his works." It teaches us, that the judgment will come on a guilty world by surprize—that "when men shall say, peace and safety, then sudden destruction cometh." The manner of its coming is compared to the catastrophe of Sodom. "As it was in the days of Lot; they ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded. But the same day, that Lot went out of Sodom, it rained fire and brimstone out of heaven, and destroyed them all. Even so shall it be in that day when the son of man is revealed." To heighten the solemnity of this scene, the sacred writers tell us, "The sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light; the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven shall be shaken—the heaven shall depart as a scroll when it is rolled together, and every mountain and island shall be removed out of

their place." What effect the expectation of such a day should have, St. Peter instructs us. "Seeing all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought we to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hastening unto the day of the Lord. Let us be diligent, that we may be found of the Lord in peace without spot and blameless."

You think that great day to be remote. Perhaps it is so. But whether it be near or remote, it will come. And when it shall come, it will be as real and important, as if it were now present. "Count the longsuffering of God's salvation. He is not willing that you should perish, but that you should come to repentance."

Were you sure, that within ten or twenty years, the frame of nature, as well as the works of man, would be dissolved, the heavens with all their splendours would vanish, and the earth with all her furniture and inhabitants would pass away, how vain would all your property, all your designs and labours appear? What folly would be stamped on avarice, ambition, worldly grandeur and ostentation, political intrigues, party contests and animosities? But, my fellow mortals, where is the mighty difference to you and me, whether the world is to be dissolved within twenty years, or whether within that time we are to leave the world forever. The latter will certainly be the case with many of us in a shorter, and with all of us in a little longer time than this. Under an impressive sense of this solemn truth, let us banish all worldly passions, and direct our cares to the grand interests of futurity.

4. Total darkness at noon-day reminds us of the solemn scene of the saviour's crucifixion.

The evangelists tell us, that when Jesus hung on the cross, "there was darkness over all the land from the sixth to the ninth hour;" or, according to our calendar, from midday to the third hour; "and the sun was darkened." The darkness continued for three hours. This, we know, could be no natural eclipse; for, in the eclipse of the week past, which appeared to be central, the total obscuration continued but about four minutes.

The darkness at the crucifixion was very extensive. It was "over all the land." Yea, it was beyond the land of Judea; or "over all the *earth*," as the words are, in one place, rendered. It was observed in countries distant from Judea; and is related by profane historians, as a phenomenon, for which no natural cause could be assigned. In a natural eclipse, the *total* darkness cannot be of very great extent. I have had correct information, that within the space of less than two hundred miles, from north to south, a segment of the sun appeared during the whole time of the late eclipse.

Nay, farther, at the time of the crucifixion there could be no natural eclipse; for the sun and moon were then in opposition. Christ was crucified at the time of the passover. The passover was to begin on the fourteenth day of the month. The Jewish month began at the first appearance of the new moon. On the fourteenth day, the moon, being full, and in opposition to the sun, could not cause an eclipse. The obscuration therefore must have been preternatural and miraculous.

That there really was such an obscuration is indubitable. It is recorded by three of the evangelists, who published their narrative so soon after the crucifixion, that many spectators of the scene, both friends and enemies to Christ, were still living. They would not have asserted such a strange phenomenon, as being universally known, in that and neighboring countries, and as having happened on a certain day, if it had not been a fact; for every man, woman and youth, living at that time, would have been able to contradict it. Had the evangelists been impostors, they would not have published a falsehood of this kind; for nothing could have been more fatal to their cause. There is no room to question the reality of the fact.

This darkness, the earthquake, and the rending of the vail of the temple, which occurred at the same time, had a great effect on the spectators. The commanding officer, who stood by the cross of Jesus, struck with astonishment, said, "Surely this was the

son of God." "And all the people, who came together to that sight, holding what was done, smote their breasts, and returned."

These miraculous appearances in the earth and in the heavens, at the time, when Jesus was suffering on the cross, were such divine attestations in his favour, as reason could not resist; and they were also most awful indications of the wrath of God against the horrid and impious work, which the infidel Jews were then transacting.

But were these the only persons against whom the darkness denounced the anger of heaven? No; It equally manifested, and still it manifests the amazing guilt of all unbelievers under the gospel—of all who are enemies to the blessed Jesus—of all who despise and oppose his religion.

Infidelity and impiety involve in them the same guilt now, as in former times. The gospel comes to us with equal evidence and authority, as it came to the Jews. They who reject it, crucify afresh its heavenly author, and are bringing on themselves swift destruction—To such is reserved the blackness of darkness forever. As they walk in the darkness of unbelief and wickedness, they will fall into the darkness of misery and despair. "When the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven, he will come in flaming fire, and will take vengeance on them who know not God, and on them who obey not the gospel."

5. The temporary darkness of an eclipse is followed with cheerful light, which "shines more and more unto the perfect day." This is a natural emblem of that moral change, in which a soul is brought out of the darkness of sin and guilt into the marvellous light of purity, pardon and peace.

How sad and gloomy is the condition of a guilty mortal, who, convinced of his numerous transgressions, feels himself condemned to eternal death. The divine law, which was delivered from Sinai in smoke and darkness, in clouds and tempest, thunders terror and destruction in his ears. But how happily is his

state reversed, when light, beaming from mount Sion, in the discoveries and promises of the gospel, breaks in on his soul, exhibits to him a dying saviour, a forgiving God, a sanctifying spirit? What joy springs up, when he finds the power of sin subdued—his enmity to God slain—his opposition to the gospel conquered—and every thought captivated to the obedience of Christ? The light is sweet, and its sweetness is increased by its succeeding to previous darkness. So the hopes and comforts of religion in the soul are exalted by their contrast to preceding anxieties and fears.

Ye awakened, disponding souls, look up to the sun of righteousness. He shines from heaven with salvation in his beams. However guilty, unworthy and impotent ye feel, there is grace sufficient for you; there is righteousness to justify you, promises to support you, the spirit to help you. Light arises in darkness. Turn your eyes from the cloud, and direct them to the sun. Christ came a light into the world, that whosoever believeth in him should not walk in darkness. Look to him, and be ye saved.

Finally: The obscuration of the sun in the sky bids us contemplate the uninterrupted brightness of the heavenly state. Could we rise above the moon, the sun which is eclipsed to the inhabitants of the earth, would shine to us in all its splendour. When the christian has the moon under his feet, he will be clothed with the sun, and crowned with stars.

There is no darkness, no night in heaven: all is light; all is glory there.

In heaven there is the light of purity, and love: The pure in heart shall see God; he is light; in him is no darkness. Nothing enters into his presence that defiles.

There is the light of *knowledge*—glorious discoveries of God—of the saviour—of the works of providence and grace—of the wonders of creation and redemption. Here we see through a glass darkly; there we shall see face to face. Here we know in part, there we shall know as we are known.

The light of heaven is constant; it is never eclipsed nor clouded. The holy city needs not the sun to shine

in it, for the glory of God doth lighten it, and Jesus is the light thereof. The nations of them who are saved shall walk in the light of it, and there shall be no night there.

How different will be the state of good men in heaven from that which they experience on earth? Here they have some light, but it is often interrupted, and always dim. How little do they know of God and his works—how much error is mixed with their faith—how much doubt with their hope—how much fear with their courage; how much carnality with their devotion? In heaven it will be otherwise. Knowledge there will be full without error, certain without perplexity and clear without confusion. Holiness will be perfect without sin, and refined without dross and corruption. And they will serve God continually without reluctance or weariness.

Let us begin the life, and accustom ourselves to the works of heaven, while we dwell on earth, that we may be prepared for admission into heaven, when we depart hence. Here God sheds down some beams of heavenly light to invite our thoughts and affections upward. The light is mingled with shades, and interrupted with clouds, because this is a state of trial, and our faith and patience must be exercised. Here we must walk by faith; we cannot walk by sight. “It is by faith and patience, that we inherit the promises.” “We are saved by hope. But hope that is seen is not hope; for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? And if we hope for that which we see not, then do we with patience wait for it. And the spirit helpeth our infirmities, and maketh intercession for us according to the will of God.”

It is but little, that we can at present know of heaven; but “then shall we know, if we follow on to know the Lord.” Let our souls follow hard after him; for what is there, which we can desire in comparison with him? “It doth not yet appear what we shall be. But when our Lord shall come, we trust, that we shall be like him, and see him as he is. And having this hope, let us purify ourselves as he is pure.”