

THE DIVINE CONDUCT REVIEWED,

A

S E R M O N

PREACHED IN THE

MEETING-HOUSE, on the Pavement, Moorfields,

JULY 29, 1784;

BEING A DAY OF

GENERAL THANKSGIVING.

BY

WILLIAM BENNET.

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PSALM cxviii. 18.

THE LORD HATH CHASTENED ME SORE ;
BUT HE HATH NOT GIVEN ME OVER
UNTO DEATH.

IT may seem, perhaps, a little singular to some, at first view, that I should, on the present occasion, select such a passage of scripture as this. But I flatter myself, that, on properly considering what is the object of our assembling, it will be far from appearing so very foreign or unsuitable. We are met, I conceive, for the special purpose of reviewing the Lord's dealings with us as a people—of recounting those mercies, which, notwithstanding our provocations of his anger, he hath exercised towards us—and of engaging our souls before him to such improvement of his goodness, as the obligations, which lie upon us, so loudly inculcate. We have long been engaged in the horrors and expences of WAR ; during which, though our own country hath not been made the im-

mediate scene of devastation and bloodshed, Providence hath greatly frowned upon us, and afflicted us with a variety of humbling dispensations; to convince us of our national iniquities, and correct us for our public departures from the Lord, that our SIN might not prove our RUIN. We have seen the rod, in the hand of divine Justice, lifted up against us. We have smarted under its repeated strokes. We have had our feelings and our fears most painfully exercised. We have been visited with breach upon breach. We have had wave after wave breaking over our heads. We have been reduced to the greatest plunges of danger and distress. And now, through the interposition of a wise and over-ruling hand of Providence, we have the pleasure to see PEACE and PUBLIC TRANQUILLITY restored. The smiles of divine mercy once more bless our island. And, though we had deserved to have been stripped of every comfort, and to have been left among the nations, for a monument of divine displeasure, as a tree which is peeled, and whose branches are broken, God, in the riches of his mercy, hath continued to us the enjoyment of various important benefits and

privileges, above those of surrounding nations.

In this view, then, I trust, it will appear, that there is rather an eminent degree of propriety and suitability in the words, which I have selected for the subject of our present meditation. They are part of a song of praise and thanksgiving, which was penned, most probably, by David King of Israel. Frequently was that eminent servant of God involved in very great dangers and difficulties, prior to his peaceful establishment on the throne. He was tried with sore exercises of faith and patience; so that sometimes he was tempted to exclaim, "*I shall one day perish by the hand of Saul**." But, at length, the Lord, in pursuance of his own counsel, and in faithfulness to his promise, raised him above all his enemies, and established him over the kingdom of Israel.—When, indeed, this psalm was composed, we are not able particularly to ascertain; but it appears to have been at some season, when his heart was very tenderly impressed with a review of the Lord's goodness, faithfulness, and grace. He begins it, therefore, with exhorting and inviting all around him to celebrate the praises

* 1 Sam. xxvii. 1.

of God, and especially those, who professed to be his people. “ O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good: because his mercy endureth for ever. Let Israel now say, that his mercy endureth for ever. Let the house of Aaron now say, that his mercy endureth for ever. Let them now that fear the Lord, say, that his mercy endureth for ever.”—He next records a particular account of the Lord’s goodness to himself; that others might see, what special obligations HE was under to thankfulness, and, that *They*, also, might be encouraged to rely on his power and loving-kindness, when in similar circumstances of danger and distress. This is continued, in a distinct enumeration of his own difficulties, and of the Lord’s merciful appearances for him, down to the words of our text; which contain the devout reflection of his own mind, both upon the circumstances through which he had been conducted, and the situation in which he then was. And, on a close review of the whole, he finds, that, notwithstanding what the Lord had permitted to befall him, he had abundant cause for gratitude and praise. Instead of murmuring against God, on account of what he had suffered, he saw reason to be filled with love
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and admiration, that he had not been cut off out of the land of the living. “ *The Lord bath chastened me sore; but he bath not given me over unto death.*”

And, if we only transfer these words from a *private and personal*, to a *public or national* account, they will furnish a train of thought, in my apprehension, highly proper to be pursued on the present occasion. I shall, therefore, take the liberty of thus accommodating their sense; and, in further discoursing upon them, shall observe the following method.

First, I shall mention some particulars, in which, as a nation, we may be said to have been *soverly chastened* of the Lord.

Secondly, Shall point out various instances of his mercy and goodness towards us, notwithstanding this, which may lead us to say with David, “ *But he bath not given us over unto death.*”—And then,

Thirdly, Direct to some proper improvement of the whole of the divine conduct towards us.

First,

First, I am to mention some particulars, in which, as a nation, we may be said to have been *soverely chastened* of the Lord.— And may we not here fix our thoughts,

(1.) On the awful DIVISIONS and DISTRACTIONS, that have prevailed among us at home? Far, indeed, would I be from casting out any pointed reflections upon either of those parties, who have carried their political opinions and disputes to such a pitch of opposition and violence one against another. Removed so far as I am from the sphere of state transactions, and unfurnished, as of course I must be, with the proper means of judging with respect to the secret principles on which these have been conducted; it would ill become me, as a Man, and much more as a Minister of the gospel, to run out either in extravagant encomiums on the one, or bitter invective against the other. It is probable, moreover, that We, who compose this assembly, may have entertained, and do still entertain, very different ideas and sentiments both as to Men and Measures, which have attracted the notice of the public, during so long a period of open contest. On no account, therefore, could it be pertinent, or
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even decent in me, to indulge the spirit of party, while I address you from the pulpit on the present occasion. We will, therefore, dismiss the question altogether, *Who have conducted themselves on the wisest and worthiest principles?* and will attend only to the Confusion and Distraction *itself*, which we must all allow to have prevailed among us, and to have pervaded the most public and important departments of the state. And, in this light, I can hardly doubt but we shall readily acknowledge, there has been ample reason to think, that Providence hath permitted this, as one mean of chastening us for our sin and folly. For, when a people, by their neglect and abuse of divine goodness, or by the prevalence of pride, lust and wickedness among themselves, awaken the Lord's displeasure against them, and so fill up the measure of their iniquity, that he sees it high time to punish them in a public manner, for an example and a warning to others; he is never at a loss for means to check the swellings of their ambition, or to make them feel the sad consequences of their evil doings. And, one way, in which he can accomplish this, is by giving them up to a confusion of counsel

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among themselves; by permitting evil spirits to obtain great power and ascendance over those, to whom is entrusted the conduct of public affairs; or, by so over-ruling the circumstances and events of his Providence, as that no harmony or confidence shall prevail among them.

Thus, when mankind, after the flood, through folly, pride and presumption, were instigated to attempt the raising of a tower that should reach even to heaven, with a view to immortalize their name, and prevent their dispersion abroad through the earth; the Lord frowned upon their impious purpose, and blasted it, by "*confounding their speech,*" and thus disconcerting all their operations: on which account, the tower itself was denominated *Babel**.—In the days of Ahab King of Israel, also, we see a remarkable instance of this, in that we read, "*An evil spirit came forth and stood before the Lord, and said, I will go forth, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets;*" to whom the Lord said, "*Thou shalt persuade and prevail also; go forth and do so*†." This the Lord then suffered, as a mean of chastening the rebellious Israelites, and,

* Gen. xi. 9.

† 1 Kings xxii. 22.

particularly,

particularly, of punishing the wickedness of *Ahab*, who, accordingly, fell in the battle, to which he went up against the Syrians. —And, without intending the least personal censure upon any individuals among us, or wishing to appear an advocate for party reflections and invectives, which, on all hands, have been dealt out with immoderate and unjustifiable heat; may we not look back upon that awful contention, party-spirit, and confusion, which have prevailed, and see reason to consider these, as what God, in righteous displeasure, hath permitted to befall us, in order to scourge and humble us for our transgressions against heaven? “*The* “*wrath of man praiseth him**,” as it is under his control, and is frequently over-ruled by his wisdom to ends, which are worthy of himself, and effective of his designs. And, if the wrath of man praise him, who will scruple to admit, that the spirits and views of individuals may be wrought upon by him—or, that he may permit “the Prince “of the power of the air” to work upon them, in such a manner, as to occasion the greatest confusion, contradiction, and distraction among a people; and this, for the

* Ps. lxxvi. 10.

purpose of correcting and punishing them for their impiety towards him? That such confusion, however, has prevailed—and, that this hath been productive of much evil unto us as a people—no one surely can dispute, who doth not wilfully shut his eyes against the light, or is not determined to resist the most stubborn evidence of facts. Indeed I much query, whether it might not with propriety be affirmed, that party-feuds and distractions among ourselves have contributed much more to what hath befallen us, as a nation, than all that foreign and avowed enemies could, otherwise, have effected against us. And it would be foolish and absurd in a very high degree, to think of accounting for all this, without admitting, without particularly attending to, the interference of a wise overruling Providence. In this respect, therefore, it may be said, “*The Lord hath chastened us sore.*”

(2.) Let us also consider the nature and circumstances of the WAR, in which we have been involved, and this will remind us of the truth of what is affirmed in our text. A war this last has been, which, in almost every circumstance of a distressing nature, hath

hath exceeded most of those, in which this kingdom has ever engaged. How unhappily has it been protracted, year after year, to a period, which was far from being foreseen, or apprehended, at its commencement! What immense treasures have been expended in the prosecution of it! And, how hath it brought upon us an accumulation of taxes, which is almost insupportable; so that invention is now upon the rack in devising methods to answer the exigencies of the state! What a mournful reflexion is it, also, when we think of the thousands, and tens of thousands, of hardy Veterans and valiant Youths, that have fallen a sacrifice by the ravages of war! Men, who had formerly achieved the greatest exploits in their country's cause, or, who promised fair to have supported her honours in a day of conflict with her natural and avowed enemies! Can we help weeping over the immense quantity of British blood, which has impurpled the seas, or dy'd the plains, to the unspeakable anguish of fathers, mothers, relatives and friends?— Is it not, likewise, to be considered as a special indication of divine displeasure towards us, that the war, which we have been waging at such an astonishing expence of treasure and
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of blood, has not been merely, nor yet principally, with those, who have long and openly avowed themselves the rivals and enemies of Great-Britain; but that the kingdom has been divided against itself—that his Majesty's own empire has been the seat of such dreadful devastation—that fellow-Protestants, friends, and relatives by birth and blood—whose religion was the same—whose interest was one—whose comfort and glory so much depended on mutual confidence and affection—who, in a state of union, might have been a terror to the world—have been left in Providence to take the field against each other, and to embrue their hands in each other's blood!—And what, alas! is it, for which we have been on both sides so madly furious against one another, which, if *temper, discretion, wisdom* and *confidence* had prevailed, might not with ease have been secured?—What, likewise, hath been the long series of events, that have taken place throughout this unhappy contest, but such as *Britons* may, and must, reflect on with grief and mortification! Hath not our boasted valour, in many instances, received a most humbling shock? Have not renowned generals and their armies been surrounded with, and obliged

obliged to surrender themselves prisoners of war to those, against whom they had held out a bold defiance? Have not our navies, which formerly spread their sails with unrivalled honour on the seas, turned back in the day of battle? And, have we not, in one stroke, suffered a dismemberment of empire, such as was never heard of or known before?

Surely, then, upon reviewing these things, we have reason to confess, that “*the Lord hath chastened us sore.*” For we ought not by any means to account merely by *second causes* for what has been so highly afflictive to us as a nation. The God of Gods, who ruleth in the earth, and who taketh vengeance upon iniquity, hath undoubtedly permitted and appointed these things, as the means of opening our eyes, which we had shut against the light, and of manifesting his hatred of our sin, which had grown up unto the heavens. “*He putteth down one*” kingdom, as well as an individual, “*and setteth up another**.” He createth *evil*, as well as giveth *peace*†. He dasheth the potsherds of the earth one against another, and maketh even “*the wrath of man to praise him.*”

* Ps. lxxv. 7.

† Is. xlv. 7.

(3.) Let us look to the POVERTY and LOSS OF TRADE which have prevailed throughout the kingdom, and these will witness to the truth of what I am endeavouring to represent. *Extravagance*, no doubt, has been the reason why the names of numbers have been announced in the public papers, to their own dishonour, and the injury of their creditors. But it must with equal readiness be admitted, that the distresses, which have come upon many, once respectable and opulent, have not been occasioned by any such cause, but have arisen from that unhappy concurrence of events, which they could neither foresee, nor prevent. The channels of trade and commerce, through which the labours of the British loom, and the various productions of our manufactories, were wont to be exported, have of late years, in great measure, been blocked up. Remittances from abroad have been unseasonably and unjustly restrained. The industrious poor have been much abridged in, if they have not wholly been deprived of, employment to support their families. And withal, the price of most of the conveniencies and necessaries of life has been advancing; partly, through the pressing demands

demands of the state, and partly, through the unfeeling rapacity of individuals: so that much "complaining has been heard in our streets." Indeed, some parts of the kingdom have exhibited a most melancholy scene of poverty and distress, as it appears from well-attested documents concerning them, that thousands of families have been ready to perish for want of bread and employment.

And how ought we to account for these things? Those, who profess themselves *Infidels*, and have no fear of God before their eyes, perhaps, would smile at the serious manner in which I wish you to exercise your thoughts upon them; and such might call them the unfortunate events of CHANCE, which happens alike to all. But, as I am addressing those, who profess to regard the Scriptures as the rule of their judgment, and are thereby taught, that all human affairs are under the direction of an over-ruling Providence; I need not fear being sneered at, or pitied, for my weakness, when I wish to have my own mind, and yours, impressed with the thought, that all this is come upon us by the will and particular appointment of heaven—that the hand of the Lord hath been stretched out

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against us—and that our iniquities have procured these things unto us.

But, I will not any longer insist on what is rather adapted to the exercises of a day of public HUMILIATION, than of public REJOICING. What hath been said, however, if it be rightly considered, as stating what have been the just expressions of the Lord's displeasure against our SIN, may prepare us the better for attending to what we proposed in the *Second* place to consider, and unto which I shall now proceed, viz. To point out various instances of the divine mercy and goodness towards us as a nation, notwithstanding what we have met with in a way of chastisement, which may lead us, in the language, and O may it be with the spirit of David! to say, “*But he hath not given us over to death.*”

Here, indeed, I cannot help feeling very painfully with you, both as a *Man* and as a *Briton*, that we have not, on this public occasion, as some of you recollect to have been the case on former days of thanksgiving, such splendid achievements to celebrate, such important victories to recount, such glorious acquisitions of wealth and power to recite, as, by the smiles of divine Providence on our
military

military exertions, were then accomplished, and refounded through the earth. We meet under circumstances far less brilliant and joyous, than have sometimes introduced a public solemnity of this nature. But, notwithstanding this, (which, perhaps, rather works on our *pride*, than any better principles) we have sufficient, yea, abundant cause to celebrate the Lord's goodness and mercy towards us with unfeigned gratitude of soul. For, indeed, he hath been far from dealing with us "after our sins, and rewarding us according to our iniquities;" but, though he hath sorely chastened and afflicted us, he hath still graciously been mindful of us, and, "*in the day of his east-wind, hath stayed his rough wind**"—It is matter of thankfulness that we are not consumed;—that we have not been given over to the will and power of our enemies—that our land and habitations have not been laid desolate—that our kingdom has not been made an *Acedama*, a field of blood. We had long ago forfeited every favour and blessing by our open infidelity and profaneness. We had richly deserved to have been held up to surrounding nations, as a monument of justice

* Is. xxvii. 8.

and vengeance, for the vilest abuse and contempt of the richest mercy. We might, in righteous retribution for our wickedness, have been destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah of old, or, as we have lately heard of desolations by earthquakes and inundations abroad. What we had every reason to have feared, but which God in his mercy hath prevented, will furnish us with just and abundant cause for thankfulness and praise.—I will not, however, content myself with thus hinting in general at the goodness of the Lord, which hath been exercised towards us, but will proceed to state a few of those particulars, which loudly call for our humble and grateful acknowledgment. And,

(1.) Let me direct your thoughts back to the time, when *the combined fleets of our natural enemies came sailing up our channel, and threatened an invasion of our coasts, without our having any force at hand to repel or resist them.* Do you not well recollect the consternation, into which all ranks of the people were thrown on that occasion? Was it not allowed on all hands, that, had they attempted, they might have effected, a landing on our shore? in which case, how might they

they have depopulated many villages and towns—pillaged and laid waste the adjacent country—and, at least, have greatly endangered, if they had not blown up and destroyed our public arsenals and stores! Was it not matter of pleasing surprize, that they did not avail themselves of the opportunity for all this, which the absence of our fleet at that juncture afforded? And what prevented? What, but the gracious over-ruling hand of divine Providence; kept them from attempting to put into execution what must certainly have appeared to them so desirable, and what was known by us to have been so practicable? Was not the Lord's goodness most remarkably apparent in our behalf, by their being turned about, as it had been with a "hook in their nose," and induced to quit our coasts with only making a vain parade? However dishonourable and disgraceful we may call it in *Them*, we should view it with peculiar emotions of thankfulness to Him, who "gathereth the winds in his fist*," and who then encompassed us with his "favour" as with a shield †.

(2.) Let me direct your thoughts to the season, in which *a riotous multitude so*

* Prov. xxx. 4.

† Ps. v. 12.

fiercely

fiercely threatened to have laid the whole city and its environs in ashes. That memorable event ought never to be forgotten by us, whether we consider it as affording a striking instance of human weakness, or of the preventing goodness of God. From what small beginnings did it originate! How insignificant, how easily to have been suppressed, were the instruments by which the devastation commenced! But with what violence and rapidity did it spread! What a strange panic seized the magistracy of the city! yea, what consternation, for a while, benumbed the minds of all in power! till, at length, after breaking open and burning prisons—letting loose the vilest miscreants on the public—ransacking, and consuming the houses of many most respectable individuals—the intoxicated rabble adjudged the whole metropolis to destruction!—It is in the recollection of you all, nor can you ever forget, what a dreadful distressing scene was then exhibited! what blind enthusiastic zeal in some, what wanton wickedness in others, and what desperate villainy in more, pervaded all our streets! And, if a gracious restraining hand of Providence had not then set bounds to the madness of the multitude, there

was the greatest reason to have feared, that both public credit, and private comfort, would have received a most fatal stab. This, therefore, also calls for a lively tribute of praise and thanksgiving.

(3.) The *establishment* of PEACE is another instance of divine goodness and mercy towards us in the midst of our afflictions. I know, indeed, that opinions widely differ with respect to the *merits* of the peace itself. But, as I am not competent, so neither in the least inclined, to enter into any minute investigation of that enquiry. Let it, therefore, suffice to observe, that peace, in itself considered, is an important blessing to Society, and that, under the circumstances which we, as a nation, had long been in, it was to us peculiarly desirable. We, as Christians, are taught to pray for peace, because “wars and fightings originate in mens lusts*,” and, because the consequences thereof are so awful with respect to thousands, who are hurried, it is to be feared, without thought or preparation, into an eternal world. War, indeed, is one of the greatest calamities to mankind, both in a civil and

* Jam. iv. 1.

moral view. It puts an end to the social intercourse of nations, which are all sprung of one blood. It works upon the worst of principles, that are found in the human breast. It opens a floodgate for all kinds of vice and villainy in a land. It makes men monsters one towards another, as it leads them to account themselves justified in violating the bonds of moral obligation, whether it be by plundering one another of their property, or by reducing them to circumstances of the greatest personal inconvenience and distress. It distracts and ruins the comfort and peace of families, by tearing children from their parents, husbands from their wives, and relatives from one another, who plunge into scenes of blood, and are cut off by an untimely death. It spreads, in fine, desolation, poverty, and wretchedness, wherever it prevails.—Involved, then, as we have so long been, in the horrors and expences of a war, which hath so weakened our national resources, clogged up the avenues of trade, and reduced us, as a people, to such extremity—who will hesitate a moment to acknowledge, that the establishment of peace between us and the powers around us, is an event, which calls for thankfulness and praise? If it be
desirable,

desirable, that arts and manufactures should revive and flourish—that the industrious poor should obtain regular and full employment—that commerce should once more spread her sails without restraint—that an open exchange of national productions should enliven and enrich our ports—and that the friendly intercourse of kingdoms should be renewed;—If it be desirable, that rapacity and plunder should cease and be discountenanced—that humanity and justice, fidelity and honour should prevail among the nations of the world;—If it be desirable, that profligacy and profaneness, cruelty and oppression, lewdness and debauchery, domestic distress and anguish, both at home and abroad, should be prevented and suppressed;—In a word, if it be desirable, that the good order of communities, the flourishing estate of kingdoms, and the general happiness of mankind should be secured and promoted;—then, as Men, as Members of society, as Citizens of the world, and, especially, as the Subjects of His kingdom, who is “*the Prince of peace,*” we should be thankful and rejoice among ourselves; we should, also, congratulate even those with whom we have been at variance, and with them should unite in blessing the

God of our mercies, that an end is put to the ravages of war—that the sword hath no longer a commission to devour—and, that public faith and friendship once more bless the world.

And let us remember, that, while men, as agents and instruments, have exerted themselves in effecting what is thus desirable, the primary productive cause is the goodness of Him, whose kingdom ruleth over all; for “*He maketh wars to cease unto the ends of the earth*”^{*}. He both adjusts events in providence, and inclines the hearts of contending powers, so as to answer the purpose of general accommodation, which, without his overruling influence, would, in most cases, be obstructed, either by the pride and ambition, or, by the rapacity and avarice, of those at variance.

(4.) Another call for thanksgiving is the *smiling prospect of plenty through the land*.—For a few seasons past we have been chastened in respect to the produce of the earth, and the inclemency of the skies. Providence hath frowned on the labours of the husbandman. The grass of the field, after being cut down,

* Ps. xlyi. 9.

had nearly perished. The precious grain, in many parts of the kingdom, was awfully blighted; and, in others, the crops of corn were thin and unproductive. Though, therefore, we have not been given up to “*cleanness of teeth,*” we have been taught, how easily the Lord could, as in justice he might, have cut off our “*whole stay of bread,*” and have stripped us at once of all our comforts and enjoyments.

But now, through the kind indulgence of divine Providence, we have a rich and glorious appearance of plenty and abundance; so that we have occasion to adopt the words of the Psalmist, “*Thou crownest the year with thy goodness, and thy paths drop fatness: they drop upon the pastures of the wilderness, and the little hills rejoice on every side. The valleys also are covered over with corn, they shout for joy, they also sing**.”—If the accounts, which we receive from various parts of the kingdom, be just, perhaps there never was known a period, when the earth was more loaded with riches and increase than it is at present; or, when, if Providence shall “*reserve unto us the appointed weeks of harvest,*” the fruits of the ground promised to be more

* Ps. lxxv. 11—13.

found and productive.—Ought not this, then, to warm our hearts with love, and fill our mouths with praise, to the God of our mercies, who, notwithstanding our provocations against him, pours forth in such profusion his goodness upon us? Ought we not all most affectionately to unite in blessing and adoring the bounteous hand of Providence, which so seasonably, so compassionately provides for our comfort as a people? Have not even the brute-creation a claim upon our gratitude for them, in vocal honours to express their obligations to divine munificence? yea, would not all nature condemn and reproach us, if we betrayed, or felt, the least reluctance to so rational, so delightful an exercise as this?—And, if from such considerations as the preceding, we may fairly deduce an argument for thankfulness and praise, how much more,

(5.) From the consideration of those many *civil* and *religious Privileges*, which we now enjoy in the *greatest extent* they were ever known to be enjoyed! This is a theme, that may well move all our finest feelings, as Men, as Christians, and especially, as *Protestant-Dissenters*. How easily

might Providence have chastened and afflicted us, by giving our enemies such an advantage over us, even at home, as to have reduced us to a state of tributary subjection; to have despoiled us of our invaluable laws and liberties, as Englishmen; to have brought us in bondage to the will of a capricious monarch; and, in a stroke, to have deprived us of all our religious privileges! Had the Lord, in righteous judgment, dealt with us according to our sins, we had long ere this seen *Ichabod* inscribed on our churches, and on our happy constitution, as a nation. We should have hung our harps upon the willows, and, in a state of servitude most cruel, have bewailed for ourselves, and for posterity, the loss of all which we held dear and sacred.—But, instead of this, behold, without infringement, the Code of our civil laws, and the Charter of our glorious privileges, which have long made us the wonder and envy of the world! What the valour of our ancestors atchieved, what their wisdom digested, and their justice confirmed, is handed down to, and enjoyed by us, without any diminution or abridgment. Our dearest rights, as Englishmen, are preserved inviolate. Our civil jurisdiction

jurisdiction proceeds upon its ancient, which have proved themselves to be the noblest, principles. Our liberty and property, as men, are guarded and secured in the most wise and effectual manner. We are blest with the auspices of a government the most mild and lenient, the most liberal and humane, that ever adorned the British annals. And, as to our privileges of a *sacred* and *religious* nature, these, so far from being *abridged*, have been materially *improved*, and *enlarged*, by a late act of the legislature, which did equal honour to the humanity, the wisdom, and the justice of those who gave it countenance and support. As *Protestant-Dissenters*, we have especial reason to be thankful, that, without being obliged to *subscribe to any human articles of faith, under pain of incurring the heaviest and most scandalous penalties*, we have a liberal toleration to worship God, in *what places*, after *what manner*, and on *what principles*, we judge to be most consonant with the word of God, without any one's being permitted, or daring, to molest us. Our teachers are not removed from our eyes into corners; nor do we seek the bread of our souls at the peril of our lives; but, without the smallest inconvenience,

venience, we can assemble in the most public manner, and enjoy our religious advantages as often as we please.—As *Protestant-Dissenters*, we have likewise occasion to rejoice, that our *Ministers*, and others duly qualified, may open schools for the education of our youth, in such principles as we hold to be scriptural and important, without the necessity of their subscribing to any human imposed creed: a privilege, which, till of late years, did not exist.—And are not these very loud and persuasive calls to thankfulness and praise? Surely “*the stone shall cry out of the wall, and the beam out of the timber shall answer it**,” in reproaching our insensibility and want of gratitude, if the survey of such distinguishing and invaluable privileges doth not excite our love, and engage our cheerful devotedness to God.—And may I not be permitted to subjoin another instance of the Lord’s goodness towards us, which calls for our thankful acknowledgment? It is,

(6.) The BLESSING which still attends the faithful dispensation of the gospel. I am not insensible, that the present is “*a day of*

* Hab. ii. 11.

“*small*

“*small things*,” in regard to the power and prevalence of true religion. Some, who are far advanced in years, may remember to have seen the day of the Lord much more strictly observed, and the places of public worship, in general, much better attended, than they are at present. But, though there be just cause for humiliation before God, that such defections from the truth and holiness of the gospel have obtained among us, yet surely there is reason for praise and rejoicing, that the gracious influences of the Spirit are not wholly withdrawn, and, that the glory of the Lord is not altogether departed.—One thing, indeed, which hath diminished the number of attendants in particular places of worship, and which leads us, perhaps improperly, to conclude, that fewer flock to hear the gospel than formerly, is, that congregations have so divided, and multiplied beyond what was their number, forty or fifty years ago: so that the difference in the aggregate, most probably, would not be found so considerable, as at first we might be ready to imagine. And, with respect to the *success* of the gospel, though I fear the present state of religion will not bear a comparison with days that are past;
yet

yet, certainly there are many persons remaining in our several churches, who both love and live the gospel; who “cleave unto the Lord with full purpose of heart;” and whose temper and conduct reflect an honour on his name. Nor are we left without instances of converting grace and power in the present day. The Lord raiseth up instruments for his work, and, adored be his goodness! he doth not suffer them to labour wholly in vain, or to spend their strength for nought. Many careless sinners, in one place and another, are still awakened by the ministry of the word. Many serious, hopeful youths are yet to be found in our different congregations. Some, from time to time, are “added to the Lord.” And thus the churches of Christ, “*walking in his fear, and in the comforts of the Holy Ghost, are edified and multiplied**.”—Say, then, whether we have not much to record of divine goodness and mercy towards us, as a people, notwithstanding all the afflictions, with which the Lord hath chastened us fore? I flatter myself, that what hath now been represented before you, carries sufficient conviction along with it, and that

* Acts ix. 31.

many of your minds are seriously disposed to enquire, “*What shall we render to the Lord for all his benefits towards us?*”—I draw, then, to a conclusion, by directing you, in the *Third* place, to some proper improvement of the whole of the divine conduct towards us.—And,

(1.) Hath the Lord chastened us sore? Let us seek, and exercise, *unfeigned repentance* for our sins, which have been the procuring cause of all our afflictions. This is the blessed, the important end, to which all the Lord’s dealings with us have been directed; to shew us, as a people, the evil of our ways, in our having so grossly contemned his authority, neglected his ordinances, profaned his sabbaths, and violated the strongest obligations of his goodness; to humble us under a sense of his righteous and holy displeasure; to fill us with ingenuous grief and shame on account of our provocations; and to produce a reformation of temper and conduct among us. For this purpose, like a wise and tender Father, he hath visited us both with his judgments and his mercies. The dispensations of his providence, one while, have

been frowning and painful; we have suffered the discipline of his rod, and felt the tokens of his displeasure: again, his countenance hath assumed a smiling aspect, and he hath sought to draw us “*with cords of a man, with bands of love**.”—And shall we, notwithstanding this, persist in our disobedience and rebellion against him? Shall we harden our hearts against the terrors of his power? Shall we think of resisting the soft allurements of his grace? Shall we manifest a proud, incorrigible, relentless spirit under all his dealings with us? Surely such conduct as this would cause his fury to break forth upon us, until it had consumed us. It would argue, not only the greatest folly, but the vilest malignity of spirit; nor could we reasonably expect otherwise, than that our country should become a desolation.—Let it, then, be our earnest prayer and concern, that the whole of the Lord’s conduct towards us, as a people, may be sanctified and blessed, to the producing of genuine, universal repentance; that we may return unto him “*with all our heart, and with weeping, and with supplications†:*” for “*the sacrifices of God are a*

* Hos. xi. 4.

† Joel ii. 12. Jer. xxxi. 9.

“ *broken spirit ; a broken and a contrite heart*
 “ *he will not despise**.” While we cultivate the warmest gratitude, and express the liveliest praise, for the various instances of his goodness and mercy towards us, let us be abased in the dust before him, and abhor ourselves, for our past provocations. Let us justify God, in all that hath come upon us ; and let our SIN, both as a people, and as individuals, be the constant object of our grief, lamentation, and abhorrence !

(2.) Have we to say with David, “ *The Lord hath chastened us sore, but he hath not given us over unto death?*” Let us adore his *patience* and *long-suffering*, that his strokes have been so few and light, in comparison with what we have deserved ! For, what nation ever was chargeable with viler abominations, than those which have abounded among us ? what people ever sinned against more exalted privileges ? or betrayed a spirit of baser ingratitude, than we have ? How have we been distinguished in Providence, by most wonderful and glorious salvations wrought for us, under circumstances the most critical and alarming ! How have

* Ps. li. 17.

we been raised above all the kingdoms of the world, in respect of civil immunities and comforts ! But, above all, how have we been loaded with benefits and obligations, in that we have enjoyed so richly the means of grace, and been blessed with the light of the everlasting gospel ! Yet ; if profaning the name and day of the Lord ; if contempt publicly shewn to the ordinances of religious worship ; if unbounded pride and vain-glory ; if conjugal infidelity and venal prostitution ; if debauchery and uncleanness of the worst description, can load a people with accumulated guilt in the sight of God ; we have long had reason to confess, that our iniquities are grown up unto the heavens. Had the Lord, therefore, “ *laid judgment to the line, and righteousness to the plummet ;*” had he “ *dealt with us after our sins, and rewarded us according to our iniquities ;*” we had shared a similar desolation with those, whose “ *place and nation*” were destroyed by the invasion of their enemies. But, instead of this, we have to sing of mercy in the midst of judgment. As a father, God hath corrected us “ *in measure,*” and, with every frowning dispensation, we have still read the tender compassion of his heart. The
language

language of his conduct hath been, “ *How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? How shall I deliver thee, Israel? How shall I make thee as Admah? How shall I set thee as Zeboim? mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together. I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger, I will not return to destroy Ephraim; for I am God, and not man, the Holy One in the midst of thee, and I will not enter into the city**.”—Hence, then, let our souls be filled with admiring and adoring thoughts of divine patience and long-suffering, that we are still a nation possessed of such various and important privileges; that the forfeiture of all our blessings hath not been taken at our hands; and, that we have so much to celebrate of the Lord’s distinguishing goodness towards us! It is, indeed, matter of astonishment, and, as such, it ought to excite our holy wonder and praise, that we have not, by our provocations, wearied out the forbearance of the Almighty, and caused him to sweep us with the besom of destruction. Let us, then, cultivate high thoughts of his long-suffering, and be earnest with him by prayer, that his goodness may lead us to repentance!

* Hof. xi. 8, 9.

(3.) Let each of us follow this day of public thanksgiving with *devoting ourselves more actively and cheerfully than ever to the service and glory of God*. In vain shall we have set apart one particular season for prayer and praise, if such an effect do not succeed. Our solemn assembling, without this, will be no better than a solemn mockery, than which nothing can be more odious and abominable in the sight of God. We have, each of us, had our share in accumulating guilt upon the nation, which hath caused the Lord so long to contend with us. We have, each of us, likewise, an interest in those favours and privileges, which we have now been recounting before the Lord. Surely, therefore, it becomes and behoves us, as individuals, to be concerned, that our conduct towards the Lord correspond with our character and obligations. And in what manner can we so properly express our sense of his goodness and mercy towards us, as by devoting ourselves unreservedly to his praise. “*Whoso offereth praise, glorifieth me, and to him that ordereth his conversation aright, will I shew the salvation of God**.” Whatever, then, be the sphere

* Pf. l. 23.

of life, in which Providence hath placed us, let it be our study and concern, respectively, to serve the cause, and advance the honour, of God therein. Let us “*love him with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our strength**.” Let all our powers and talents be devoted to his praise. Let us exert what influence we are possessed of, to discountenance, and suppress, what is sinful and displeasing in his sight. Let us cherish a spirit of unfeigned piety in ourselves, and make it our delightful object to promote the same disposition of mind among others. So may we hope, that we shall still be that “*happy people, whose God is the Lord†.*”

* Luk. x. 27.

† Ps. cxliv. 15.



F I N I S.