

THE SUFFICIENCY OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURES,

IN

THE MEMOIR OF
WILLIAM CHURCHMAN,

A POOR CRIPPLE,

WHO NEVER READ ANY BOOK BUT THE BIBLE.

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in the Testimony of its Foes.

The entrance of thy word giveth light ; it giveth understanding to the simple.—*David.*

From a child thou hast known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation.—*Paul.*

Search the Scriptures.—*Jesus Christ.*

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MEMOIR, &c.

THE most interesting and useful memoirs with which we are furnished by the pen of biography, are not always those of the most distinguished public characters; the purple tints of the violet are not less pleasing, nor is its delicate odour less fragrant, when we accidentally discover it in a sequestered vale, than when it assists, amidst a multitude of different flowers, in ornamenting the garden: on the contrary, it affords our senses a superior gratification, when unexpectedly discovered: and insulates our attention more completely, when mingled with no rival beauties, nor merely contributing a partial share of sweetness to the variegated perfumes of the parterre.

Thus genuine lowliness, faith unfeigned, piety undissembled, pure evangelical religion advanced to high degrees of eminence, when they appear in a character to the formation of which a variety of concurring circumstances have contributed, will interest the mind of every real Christian; but when unexpectedly discovered in a soil to the fertility of which, neither the possession of brilliant talent, the advantages of early tuition, continual cultivation, nor extensive information received from reading the works of the learned, and conversing with the wise and good, have rendered the least assistance; the hand of the divine Former more conspicuously appears, and even the tongue of incredulity has been constrained to exclaim, with the vanquished sorcerers of Egypt, ‘It is the finger of God!’

I delight in retracing sensations of this kind, though a considerable period of time has passed since I beheld the scenes that awakened them in my heart: especially since the character then forming by divine influence, is

now perfected in a superior region; and while I recollect, with sacred pleasure, the delightful feelings which it produced when viewed in its infant state—I earnestly anticipate the richer delight of beholding its complete glory and radiance in the blissful world above.

Some years ago, soon after I had commenced preaching an occasional lecture in the village of Overton, I was casually informed, in conversation with a person who himself made no great pretensions to a religious character, that he had accidentally conversed with a poor deformed cripple, living in a wretched cot in the neighbourhood of that place, whose name was William Churchman; who had much surprised him by his fluency in talking on religious subjects; and the more so, because the man did not appear to have read any book but the Bible, nor to have attended any public worship, nor conversed with religious people of any denomination, so that he could not possibly conceive how he could have acquired the knowledge he appeared to possess.

My curiosity was much excited by this account, and I formed an instant determination to gratify it by visiting the subject of it on the evening of the following Sabbath, when I was engaged to preach at Overton, which I could conveniently accomplish, as his residence was near the road, by which I sometimes returned home.

As I approached the cottage, its exterior gave me at once an idea of the wretched poverty of the inhabitants, the thatch of the decayed roof was pervious in many places to the rain of heaven,

“ And all the pelting of the pitiless storm.”

The windows, of which there were two, one in each story, retained scarcely any unbroken panes of glass, and their many apertures were imperfectly stopped with straw, hay, and many-coloured rags.

The shattered door stood open; on entering I beheld seated on a little stool, which, with a broken chair, and an old oaken table, composed the whole furniture of the miserable hovel, an object, whose *external* appear-

ance was expressive of greater wretchedness than even that of the habitation itself; and in spite of the favourable idea I had conceived of him before, excited in my frame a shuddering of mingled pity and horror.

His countenance appeared to be that of a man about thirty years old, pale and squalid, his head, of an immoderate size, formed a shocking contrast to his withered limbs, which were not larger than those of a child of ten years old, distorted and deformed by several curvatures both in the legs and spine; sad consequence of neglect suffered in his infancy, from the carelessness and brutality of an ignorant and drunken mother.

He was reading when I came in : pursuant to a design I had formed, of knowing his sentiments and character from himself, without discovering my own, I accosted him with a very careless and indifferent air, "William, how do you do? what book is that you are reading?" He raised his head to look at me, and replied with a look and tone of seriousness and affection, which instantly removed all those unpleasant sensations his appearance had excited in my mind, "The New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."

"Ha!" said I, "I have heard your religious people say, that a great deal of good may be got from that book, perhaps you can tell me if it be so, for I am sure I am bad enough, and if it will make me better, I'll read it too." He replied very gravely, "If the same Spirit who moved holy men of old to write it, open your heart to understand it, then it will do you good; but not else, for the natural man discerneth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."

"But," rejoined I, still affecting ignorance of his meaning, "how then came you to understand them? surely you cannot be a learned man?"

Eyeing me with a solemn and piercing attention, he returned: "Sir, I don't know you, nor do I know why you came in here; but this I know, that I am commanded by this book to be ready to give every man that asketh a reason of the hope that is in me, and I pray

God that I may be enabled of him to do it with meekness and fear; you see, sir, what a cripple I am, but you do not know what a sinner I am."

"You a sinner!" exclaimed I, "how can that be? you are not able to get about to drink, game, dance, and carouse, as the rest of us can, how then in the name of wonder is it possible that you should be a sinner?"

"True," said he, "I could not; but yet I am one of the very vilest of sinners, for I believe no son of Adam ever sinned in the way I have done; for I thought because God Almighty had made me such a poor lame cripple, and punished me so much I supposed for nothing, that therefore I might take the liberty to sin without fear, for I thought that he would never be so hard as to punish me here and hereafter too; so because that was the sin I could most easily indulge, I delighted to curse and swear, and I am sure I made such new oaths and curses, that even if you have been used to swear yourself, they were so dreadful that they would make you tremble to hear them.

"However, blessed be God, about three years ago as I was walking on my crutches in a fine sun-shiny day near the door, I was seized all at once with a violent pain in my stomach, I cried out and fell down, and I really thought I was going to die presently: at first I did not seem to have any fear of death, for the reason I told you before, but as I continued in violent pain, a thought came across my mind, what good work have I done in my life? Alas! none! then I shall not go to heaven now; and if not, why I must go to hell at last. Now I was miserable indeed, for I did not know any other way to heaven than by my own works."

"Dear me," interrupted I, "what other way can there be, than doing all the good we can in order to gain the favour of God Almighty?"

"He answered me, "By the deeds of the law shall no flesh living be justified, for by the law is the knowledge of sin: not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost, which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour."

“But,” continued he, “in this distress I tried to pray, but of all the prayers you ever read in your life, if ever you read any, or all that you ever heard, if ever you heard any body pray, I believe you never heard any thing like it, I don’t think it was the prayer of faith, and yet I believe that God heard and answered it. I do not know why, but it was as it pleased him, this, was it as near as I can remember.

“Lord, I am a poor sinner that never did any good in my life, and now I am afraid I must die and go to hell, but O Lord, if thou canst save me, pray do; though I don’t know how it can be. O try me once more, and I will be better than David; for he prayed seven times a day, but I will pray eight times, and read twelve chapters.” But by praying, I only meant reading eight collects out of my mother’s Prayer Book.”

“Well,” interrupted I again, “what can be better praying than reading those excellent collects?”

“Ah, Sir!” said he, very earnestly, “you might read all the prayers over that ever were made by man, you might make very good prayers for yourself, or if you were a bishop or some such great man, you might make prayers for other people, which they might *pray* in reading, and God might hear them, and yet never pray yourself in your life.”

“Well,” said I, “this is very strange, what is praying then?”

He replied, “praying is telling the great God what we *feel* that we want of him.”

Returning to his narrative, he proceeded thus:—“It pleased God that I soon got somewhat better, and I set about my task as I had promised; but, alas! in a little time, I found that I *did* not pray. I could not believe that I could not love God, that I could not repent of sin, and at last I left off reading my prayers, because I was afraid of mocking God any longer; but blessed be his name, he did not suffer me to leave off reading the Testament, though the more I read, the worse I was, for I read it all through, and all seemed to condemn me; now I can see in it exceeding great and precious promises, but I could not see any of them then, I could only attend to such awful words as these: “Ye serpents,

Ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?

“Where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.

“The smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever.

“Thou after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasureth up to thyself wrath against the day of wrath, and revelation of the righteous judgment of God.

“The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.

“The Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven, in flaming fire, taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel.

“Yet I began to read it over again, and when I came the second time to the blessed first chapter of the first epistle of John, and read these precious words:—‘The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin,’ I felt that precious blood relieve my wounded conscience, and I seemed to myself as if I was in a new world. I could *now* repent, I could believe, I could love God, and if I had a thousand lives, I could have laid them all down for Christ.”

“These are very wonderful things,” said I, “that you tell me, but what was the reason why God showed them to you? was it because you were so zealous and so earnest in reading the Testament?”

He returned with inexpressible energy. “Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his purpose, and grace given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.”

“What,” exclaimed I, “can you possibly make me believe, that the great God ever thought any thing about a poor insignificant crippled man as you are, before he made the world?”

“Yes,” said he, “else why is it said,—‘chosen in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love?’”

“Surely,” said I, “you have never sinned since that time.”

He replied, “In many things we offend all. If we

say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

"But," said I, "if you should sin so much as to go to hell after this, you had better have remained as ignorant as I am."

"Being confident," he replied, "that he who hath begun a good work in you, will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ."

"My sheep will hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall any pluck them out of my hand."

"If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: and he is the propitiation for our sin; and not for our's only, but also for the sins of the whole world."

"Who himself bare our sins in his own body on the tree."

"Do I understand you rightly?" asked I, "that it does not signify what sins you commit, or how you live, now he is become your Saviour?"

He replied, with a look and accent of animated and holy indignation, "God forbid! how shall we who are dead to sin, live any longer therein? for the love of Christ constraineth us, because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: and that he died for all, that they which live, should not any longer live unto themselves, but to him that died for them and rose again."

Glancing his eye on my face, while he was thus speaking, he discerned a rising tear which I could no longer suppress, and instantly cried out, "I am sure, Sir, you are not what you seem; I adjure you, tell me what you are, and why you come to see me?"

"My dear Christian brother," said I, "it is true as you say, I am not what I seem; I am a poor sinner, who, like you, have been led by the Holy Spirit to trust in that Jesus, who died for the ungodly."

After a short pause, in which he seemed revolving something in his mind, he said, "I have heard one of the neighbours say, that there is a strange kind of man who comes sometimes to preach at David Turman's

house, and that folks call him a metridate,* or some such name; are not you the man?"

"Yes, my dear friend," said I, "I am the man. I have just been telling your poor neighbours, that 'the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.'"

Never shall I forget his look or his action; rising hastily from his seat, and grasping one of my hands in both of his, he instantly dropped on his knees, and lifting up his eyes, beaming with extacy, he cried aloud:—

"O my God, I thank thee, thou hast not only answered, but exceeded my request; I prayed that I might see and converse with one of thy people before I died, and lo, thou hast sent me one of the ministers of Jesus."

"And now, my dear Sir, (to me) you must tell me what you said to the people upon that sweet verse, for I never heard a gospel sermon in my life."

I complied, and for one time only enjoyed a pleasure, unequalled in the twenty-six years of my ministry, but which I should rejoice to witness in a numerous assembly; the unspeakable delight of beholding my whole audience dissolved in sacred pleasure, and feasting with more than epicurean eagerness on the divine word.

When I had closed, "You know not," said he "how you came to be inclined to preach at Overton, but I can tell you: ever since I have been new born I have daily prayed to my heavenly Father, that if there was any minister of Christ in England, which I thought there must be somewhere, because the Bible was here; he would send one to teach my poor blind neighbours, and he has sent you; and therefore, viewing you as sent in answer to prayer, I doubt not but God will make you useful to them."

After some further conversation, I commended him to God in prayer, and we parted.

During these interesting scenes, time glided unperceived by either of us: it was now late, the moon was absent, but thousands of the distant lamps of heaven studded the sable robe of night, and afforded a glimmering light, better suited to the solemn and delightful

* Meaning, I suppose, a Methodist.

feelings of my soul than the bright glare of day ; the profound silence was interrupted by,

“ No noise but water, ever friend to thought ;”

Except the sadly pleasing strains of the nightingale, for the rest of the aerial choir were sunk in sleep, and even the grasshopper had forgotten his chirping.

As I pursued my solitary walk homewards, I felt my mind expand, my views of the excellence of the Bible were heightened and extended.

Precious volume! exclaimed I, how comparatively mean and insignificant is all knowledge, except that which thy inestimable leaves display!

“ Here the fair Tree of Knowledge grows,
No danger dwells therein.”

O! that every eye which beholds “ the sun when he shineth, or the moon walking in brightness,” or gazes on yonder gems of the night, which declare the glory of their Maker, was blest with the superior radiance of this divine luminary, that every man in every clime possessed, and duly prized the invaluable treasure of a **BIBLE!**

But the blind are insensible of the cheering ray of light, O, spirit divine, who, with influence irresistible, accompanied the mandate, “ Let there be light.”

“ Knock with the hammer of thy word,
“ And break into each heart.”

And while reflecting on the sovereignty of the divine Spirit, in his making this poor despised obscure being wise unto salvation, by means of the Bible alone, I humbly trust I felt glowing in my heart, somewhat of the sentiment of my dearest Lord and Master, when he said, “ I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid those things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight.”

The communication which I made of these very interesting particulars, to my friends on my return, induced several Christians of different denominations re-

peatedly to visit him with me, whose surprise and pleasure were equal to my own.

A plan was laid by a few benevolent friends, to render his outward circumstances more comfortable, though I must do him the justice to say, he was very averse to it. "I can live," said he, "on the parish allowance, (which was only two shillings per week!) and perhaps some of God's children who have families, are in much greater want than I."

But God's ways are not as our ways! This jewel was to lie no longer in the dunghill; this radiant star was no longer to be enveloped in the mists and clouds of this gloomy atmosphere; it was destined to adorn a brighter region. We just caught a transient glance of the sparkling radiance of the descending luminary, which was now to set on earth, that it might rise to set no more in the world of eternal glory.

One evening, soon after, he was sitting with his mother, and reading the Bible to her apparently in as good health as ever he had enjoyed, when he on a sudden cried out, "Mother, I am taken very ill, help me up the ladder (the only stair-case they had) to bed, and then I shall have but one more step to ascend, and I shall be in my Father's house."

She assisted him to bed, and went to the next house to procure some gin, her only supposed remedy for every disease! and to call her neighbour to her assistance, but when she returned he was speechless; and in a few minutes, without a struggle, or a sigh, entered into the joy of his Lord.

I give no comment, I make no remarks, I leave this narrative to the blessing of God, and the reflection of the reader's conscience.