


Sermons of John Newton

Based on Scripture Passages
Used in Handel's 'Messiah' Part 2

Booklet Eight

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16. The Lamb of God, the Great Atonement - John 1:29
 17. Messiah Despised, and Rejected of Men - Isaiah 53:3
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Booklet Eight

16. The Lamb of God, the Great Atonement, 17. Messiah Despised, and Rejected of Men and 18. Voluntary Suffering

16. The Lamb of God, the Great Atonement

“Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!” John 1:29.

“Great and marvellous are the works of the LORD God almighty!” We live in the midst of them, and the little impression they make upon us, sufficiently proves our depravity. He is great in the very smallest; and there is not a plant, flower, or insect, but bears the signature of infinite wisdom and power. How sensibly then should we be affected by the consideration of the Whole, if sin had not blinded our understandings, and hardened our hearts! In the beginning, when all was dark, unformed, and waste, His powerful Word produced light, life, beauty, and order. He commanded the sun to shine, and the planets to roll. The immensity of creation is far beyond the reach of our conceptions. The innumerable stars, the worlds, which however large in themselves, are, from their remoteness, but barely visible, to us are of little more immediate, and known use, than to enlarge our idea of the greatness of their Author. Small, indeed, is the knowledge we have of our own system; but we know enough to render our indifference inexcusable. The glory of the sun must strike every eye, and in this enlightened age, there are few persons, but have some ideas of the magnitude of the planets, and the rapidity, and regularity of their motions. Farther, the rich variety which adorns this lower creation, the dependence and relation of the several parts, and their general subservience to the accommodation of man, the principal inhabitant, together with the preservation of individuals, and the continuance of every

species of animals, are subjects, not above the reach of common capacities, and which afford almost endless and infinite scope for reflection and admiration. But the bulk of mankind regard them not. The vicissitudes of day and night, and of the revolving seasons, are, to them, matters of course; as if they followed each other without either cause or design. And though the philosophers, who, professedly, attach themselves to the study of the works of nature, are overwhelmed by the traces of a wisdom and arrangement, which they are unable to comprehend; yet few of them are led to reverential thoughts of God, by their boasted knowledge of His creatures. Thus men “live without God in the world,” though they “live, and move, and have their being in Him,” and are incessantly surrounded, by the most striking proofs of His presence and energy. Perhaps an earthquake, or a hurricane, by awakening their fears, may force upon their minds a conviction of His power over them, and excite an occasional momentary application to Him; but when they think the danger over, they relapse into their former stupidity.

What can engage the attention, or soften the obduracy, of such creatures? Behold, one wonder more, greater than all the former; the last, the highest effect of divine goodness! God has so loved rebellious, ungrateful sinners, as to appoint them a Saviour in the person of His only Son. The prophets foresaw His manifestation in the flesh, and foretold the happy consequences—that His presence would change the wilderness into a fruitful field, that He was coming to give sight to the blind, and life to the dead; to set the captive at liberty; to unloose the heavy burden; and to bless the weary with rest. But this change was not to be wrought merely by a word of power, as when He said, “Let there be light, and there was light” (Genesis 1:3). It was great, to speak the world from nothing; but far greater, to redeem sinners from misery. The salvation, of which He is the Author, though free to us, must cost Him dear. Before the mercy of God can be actually dispensed to such offenders, the rights of His justice, the demands of His law, and the honour of His government, must be

provided for. The early institution and long continued use, of sacrifices, had clearly pointed out the necessity of an atonement; but the real and proper Atonement could only be made by MESSIAH. The blood of slaughtered animals could not take away sin, nor display the righteousness of God in pardoning it. This was the appointed, covenanted work of MESSIAH, and He alone could perform it. With this view He had said, “Lo I come” (Psalm 40:7). And it was in this view, when John saw Him, that he pointed Him out to his disciples, saying, “Behold the Lamb of God!”

Three points offer to our consideration,

1. The title here given to MESSIAH, “The Lamb of God.”
2. The efficacy of His sacrifice, “He taketh away sin.”
3. The extent of it, “The sin of the world.”

1. He is “the Lamb of God.” The paschal lamb, and the lambs which were daily offered, morning and evening, according to the law of Moses, were of God’s appointment; but this Lamb was, likewise, of His providing. The others were but types [prophetic symbols]. Though many, they were all insufficient to cleanse the consciences of the offerers from guilt (Hebrews 10:1); and they were all superseded, when MESSIAH, “by the one offering of Himself, once for all, made an end of sin, and brought in an everlasting righteousness,” in favour of all who believe in His name.

This title, therefore, “The Lamb of God,” refers to His voluntary substitution for sinners, that by His sufferings and death, they who deserved to die, might obtain eternal life through Him, and for His sake. Mankind were universally chargeable with transgression of the law of God, and were in a state of alienation from Him. A penalty, in case of disobedience, was annexed to the law they had broken; to which, they, as offenders, were therefore obnoxious. Though it would be presumptuous in such worms as we are, to determine, upon principles of our own, whether the sovereign Judge of the universe could, consistently

with His own glory, remit this penalty without satisfaction, or not; yet, since He has favoured us with a revelation of His will upon this point, we may speak more confidently, and affirm that it was not consistent with His truth and holiness, and that of His moral government to do it, because this is His own declaration. We may now be assured, that the forgiveness of one sinner, and, indeed, of one sin, by an act of mere mercy, and without any interposing consideration, was incompatible with the inflexibility of the law, and the truth and justice of the Lawgiver. But mercy designed the forgiveness of innumerable sinners, each of them charged with innumerable sins. And the declaration, that God is thus merciful, was to be recorded and publicly known, through a long succession of ages, and to extend to sins not yet committed. An act of grace so general and unreserved, might lead men (not to speak of superior intelligences) to disparaging thoughts of the holiness of God, and might even encourage them to sin with hope of impunity, if not connected with some provision, which might show, that the exercise of His mercy was in full harmony with the honour of all His perfections. How God could “be just, and yet justify those” (Romans 3:26) whom His own righteous constitution condemned, was a difficulty too great for finite understandings to solve. But herein is God glorious. His wisdom propounded, and His love afforded, the adequate, the only possible expedient. He revealed to our first parents His purpose, which in the fullness of time He accomplished, of sending “forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law,” (Galatians 4:4) to redeem sinners from the curse of the law, by sustaining it for them. Considering the dignity of His person, and the perfection of His obedience, His sufferings and death for sins not His own, displayed the heinousness of sin, and the severe displeasure of God against it, in a much stronger light, than the execution of the sentence upon the offenders could possibly do. It displays, likewise, the justice of this sentence, since neither the dignity, nor the holiness of the Surety, could exempt Him from suffering; and that though He was the Beloved of God, He was not spared. This

is what I understand by atonement and satisfaction for sin.

2. The efficacy of this Atonement is complete. “The Lamb of God,” thus slain, “taketh away sin;” both with respect to its guilt, and its defilement. The Israelites, by looking to the brazen serpent (Numbers 21:9), were saved from death and healed of their wounds. “The Lamb of God” is an object, proposed not to our bodily sight, but to the eye of the mind, which indeed, in fallen man, is naturally blind; but the Gospel message, enlivened by the powerful agency of the Holy Spirit, is appointed to open it. “He who” thus “seeth the Son, and believeth on Him” (John 6:40), is delivered from guilt and condemnation, is justified from all sin. He is warranted to plead the sufferings of the “Lamb of God” in bar of his own; the whole of the Saviour’s obedience unto death, as the ground and title of his acceptance unto life. Guilt or obnoxiousness to punishment being removed, the soul has an open way of access to God, and is prepared to receive blessings from Him. For as the sun, the fountain of light, fills the eye that was before blind, the instant it receives sight; so God, who is the Fountain of Goodness, enlightens all His intelligent creatures according to their capacity, unless they are blinded by sin, and rendered incapable of communion with Him. The Saviour is now received and enthroned in the heart, and from His fullness, the life of grace is derived and maintained. Thus not only the guilt, but the love of sin, and its dominion, are taken away, subdued by grace, and cordially [sincerely] renounced by the believing, pardoned sinner. The blood, which frees him from distress, preserves a memory of the great danger and misery, from which he has been delivered, warm upon his heart; inspires him with gratitude to his Deliverer; and furnishes with an abiding constraining motive, for cheerful and universal obedience.

3. The designed extent of this gratuitous removal of sin, by the oblation of “the Lamb of God,” is expressed in a large and indefinite manner. He takes away the sin of the world. Many of my hearers need not be told, what fierce and voluminous disputes

have been maintained, concerning the extent of the death of Christ. I am afraid the advantages of such controversies, have not been answerable to the zeal of the disputants. For myself, I wish to be known, by no name, but that of a Christian; and implicitly to adopt no system but the Bible. I usually endeavour to preach to the heart and the conscience, and to wave [avoid], as much as I can, all controversial points. But as the subject now lies directly before me, I shall embrace the occasion, and simply, and honestly, open to you the sentiments of my heart concerning it.

If it be inferred that He actually designed and intended the salvation of all men, because the death of Christ is here said to take away “the sin of the world,” or, (as this Evangelist expresses it in another place) the “whole world” (1 John 2:2), such an inference would be contradicted by fact. For it is certain that all men will not be saved (Matthew 7:13, 14). It is to be feared, that the greater part of those, to whom the Word of His salvation is sent, perish in their sins. If, therefore, He cannot be disappointed of His purpose, since many do perish, it could not be His fixed design, that all men should be finally and absolutely saved.

The exceeding great number, once dead in trespasses and sins, who shall be found on His right hand, at the great Day of His appearance, are frequently spoken of in appropriate and peculiar language. They are styled His sheep (John 10:11, 16), for whom He laid down His life; His elect (Mark 13:27), His own (John 13:1); those to whom it is given to believe in His name (Philippians 1:29), and, concerning whom, it was “the Father’s good pleasure to predestinate them to the adoption of children” (Ephesians 1:5). By nature, “they are children of wrath, even as others” (Ephesians 2:3); and no more disposed in themselves to receive the truth, than those who obstinately and finally reject it. Whenever they become willing they are made so, “in a day” of divine “power” (Psalm 110:3); and wherein they differ, it is grace “that makes them to differ” (1 Corinthians 4:7). Passages in the Scriptures to this purpose, are innumerable; and though much ingenuity has been employed to soften them, and to

make them speak the language of an hypothesis, they are so plain in themselves, “that he who runs may read.” It is not the language of conjecture, but of inspiration, that they whom the Lord God “did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son” (Romans 8:29). And though some serious persons perplex themselves with needless and painful reasonings, with respect to the sovereignty of God in His conduct towards mankind, they all, if truly spiritual and enlightened, stand upon this very ground, in their own experience. Many, who seem to differ from us in the way of argumentation, perfectly accord with us, when they simply speak of what God has done for their souls. They know, and acknowledge as readily as we, that they were first found of Him when they sought Him not; and that otherwise, they neither should, nor could, have sought Him at all; nor can they give any better reason than this, why they are saved out of the world. “That it pleased the LORD to make them His people” (1 Samuel 12:22).

But, on the other hand, I cannot think the sense of the expression is sufficiently explained, by saying, That the world, and the whole world, is spoken of, to teach us, that the sacrifice of “the Lamb of God” was not confined, like the Levitical offerings, to the nation of Israel only; but that it is available for the sins of a determinate number of persons, called “the Elect,” who are scattered among many nations, and found, under a great variety of states and circumstances in human life. This is, undoubtedly, the truth, so far as it goes; but not, I apprehend, fully agreeable to the Scriptural manner or representation. That there is an election of grace, we are plainly taught; yet, it is not said, “that Jesus Christ came into the world to save” the Elect, but that He came to save “sinners,” to “seek and to save them that are lost” (1 Timothy 1:15; Luke 19:10). Upon this ground, I conceive that ministers have a warrant to preach the Gospel to every creature, and to address the conscience of every man in the sight of God: and that every person who hears this Gospel, has thereby a warrant, an encouragement, yea, a command, to apply

to Jesus Christ for salvation. And that they who refuse, thereby exclude themselves, and perish, not because they never had, nor possibly could have any interest in His atonement, but, simply, because they will not come unto Him that they may have life. I know something of the cavils and curious reasonings which obtain upon this subject, and I know I may be pressed with difficulties, which I cannot resolve to the full satisfaction of enquiring and speculative spirits. I am not disheartened, by meeting with some things, beyond the grasp of my scanty powers, in a book, which I believe to be inspired by Him, whose ways and thoughts are higher than ours, “as the heavens are higher than the earth” (Isaiah 55:8, 9). But, I believe, that vain reasonings, self-will, an attachment to names and parties, and a disposition to draw our sentiments from human systems, rather than to form them by a close and humble study of the Bible, with prayer for divine teaching, are the chief sources of our perplexities and disputes.

The extent of Atonement is frequently represented, as if a calculation had been made, how much suffering was necessary for the Surety to endure, in order to exactly expiate the aggregate number of all the sins, of all the Elect; that so much He suffered precisely, and no more; and that when this requisition was completely answered, He said, “It is finished, bowed His head, and gave up the ghost” (John 19:30). But this nicety of computation does not seem analogous to that unbounded magnificence and grandeur, which overwhelms the attentive mind, in the contemplation of the divine conduct of the natural world. When God waters the earth, He waters it “abundantly” (Psalm 65:10). He does not restrain the rain to cultivated, or improvable spots, but, with a profusion of bounty worthy of Himself, His clouds pour down water, with equal abundance, upon the barren mountain, the lonely desert, and the pathless ocean. Why may we not say with the Scripture, that Christ died to “declare the righteousness of God” (Romans 3:25, 26), to manifest that He is just in justifying the ungodly, who

believe in Jesus? And for anything we know to the contrary, the very same display of the evil and demerit of sin, by the Redeemer's agonies and death, might have been equally necessary, though the number of the Elect were much smaller, than it will appear to be, when they shall all meet before the throne of glory. If God had formed this earth for the residence of one man only; had it been His pleasure to afford him the same kind and degree of light which we enjoy; the same glorious sun, which is now sufficient to enlighten and comfort the millions of mankind, would have been necessary for the accommodation of that one person. So, perhaps, had it been His pleasure to save but one sinner, in a way that should give the highest possible discovery of His justice, and of His mercy, this could have been done by no other method, than that which He has chosen for the salvation of the innumerable multitudes, who will, in the Great Day, unite in the song of praise, to the Lamb "who loved them, and washed them from their sins in His own blood." As the sun has a sufficiency of light for the eyes, (if there were so many capable of beholding it) equal in number to the leaves on the trees, and the blades of grass that grow upon the earth; so in Jesus, the Sun of Righteousness, "there is plenteous Redemption," He "is rich in mercy to all that call upon Him" (Psalm 130:7; Romans 10:12); and He invites sinners, without exception, to whom the Word of His salvation is sent, even to the ends of the earth, to "look unto Him, that they may be saved" (Isaiah 45:22).

Under the Gospel dispensation, and by it, God commands "all men, everywhere, to repent" (Acts 17:30). All men, therefore, everywhere, are encouraged to hope for forgiveness, according to the constitution prescribed by the Gospel; otherwise repentance would be both impracticable and unavailing. And therefore, the command to repent, implies a warrant to believe in the name of Jesus, as taking away the sin of the world. Let it not be said, that to call upon men to believe, which is an act beyond their natural power, is to mock them. There are prescribed means for the

obtaining of faith, which it is not beyond their natural power to comply with, if they are not wilfully obstinate. We have the Word of God for our authority. “God cannot be mocked” (Galatians 6:7), neither doth He mock His creatures. Our Lord did not mock the young Ruler, when He told him, that if he would sell his possession upon earth, and follow Him, “he should have treasure in Heaven” (Luke 18:22). Had this Ruler no power to sell his possessions? I doubt not, but that he himself, thought he had power to sell them if he pleased. But while he loved his money better than he loved Christ, and preferred earthly treasures to heavenly, he had no will to part with them. And a want of will, in a moral agent, is a want of power in the strongest sense. Let none presume to offer such excuses to their Maker, as they would not accept in their own concerns. If you say of a man, he is such a liar that he cannot speak a word of truth; so profane that he cannot speak without an oath; so dishonest that he cannot omit one opportunity of cheating or stealing; do you speak of his disability to do good, as an extenuation, and because you think it renders him free of blame? Surely you think the more he is disinclined to do good; and habituated to evil, the worse he is. A man that can speak lies and perjury, that can deceive and rob, but is such an enemy to truth and goodness, that he can do nothing that is kind or upright, must be a shocking character indeed! Judge not more favourably of yourself if you can love the world and sensual pleasure, but cannot love God. If you can fear a worm like yourself, but live without the fear of God; if you can boldly trample upon His laws, but will not, and therefore cannot humble yourself before Him, and seek His mercy, in the way of His appointment.

We cannot ascribe too much to the grace of God; but we should be careful, that under a semblance of exalting His grace, we do not furnish the slothful and unfaithful with excuses for their wilfulness and wickedness (Matthew 25:16). God is gracious; but let man be justly responsible for his own evil, and not presume to state his case so, as would, by just consequence, represent the

holy God as being the cause of sin, which He hates and forbids.

The whole may be summed up in two points, which I commend to your serious attention; which it must be the business of my life to enforce, and which, I trust, I shall not repent of having enforced, either at the hour of death, or in the Day of Judgment, when I must give an account of my preaching, and you of what you have heard in this place.

(1). That salvation is, indeed, wholly of grace. The gift of a Saviour, the first dawn of light into the heart, all the supports and supplies needful for carrying on the work, from the foundation to the top-stone, all is of free grace.

(2). That now “the Lamb of God” is preached to you, as taking away the sin of the world, if you reject Him, which may the Lord forbid! I say, if you reject Him, your blood will be upon your own head. You are warned, you are invited. Dare not to say, “Why doth He yet find fault, for who hath resisted His will?” (Romans 9:19). If He will save me, I shall be saved; if not, what can I do? God is merciful, but He is also holy and just; He is almighty, but His infinite power is combined with wisdom, and regulated by the great designs of His government. He can do, innumerable things, which, He will not do. What He will do (so far as we are concerned) His Word informs us, “and not one jot or tittle thereof shall fail” (Matthew 5:18).

17. Messiah Despised, and Rejected of Men

“He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrow, and acquainted with grief” Isaiah 53:3.

The heathen moralists, ignorant of the character and perfections of God, the true dignity and immortality of the soul, and the root and extent of human depravity, had no better foundation, for what they call virtue, than pride; no higher aim in their regulations, than the interests of society, and the conduct of civil life. They expressed, indeed, occasionally, some sentiments of a superior kind; but these, however just and valuable upon the

principles of revelation, were delusive and impracticable upon their own. And * Brutus, one of the most admired characters of antiquity, confessed, just before he put an end to his own life, that having long been enamoured of virtue as a real good, he found it, at last, to be but an empty name. But though they had so little satisfaction, or success, in the pursuit of virtue, they were so pleased with the idea they formed of it, as generally to supposed, that if virtue could become visible, it would necessarily engage the esteem and admiration of mankind.

* Marcus Junius Brutus - Roman politician (85-42 BC).

There was, however, one remarkable exception to this opinion. The wisdom of * Socrates, seems to have been, in many respects, different from that of the bulk of their philosophers. Socrates having expressed his idea of a perfect character, a truly virtuous man, ventured to predict the reception such a person, if such a one could ever be found, would meet with from the world. And he thought that his practice would be so dissimilar to that of other men; his testimony against their wickedness so strong, and his endeavours to reform them, so importunate and unwelcome, that, instead of being universally admired, he would be disliked and hated. That mankind were too degenerate, and too obstinate, to bear, either the example, or the reproof, of such a person; and would most probably revile and persecute him, and put him to death as an enemy to their peace.

* Socrates - Greek philosopher (469-399 BC).

In this instance, the judgment of Socrates accords with the language of the Old, and with the history of the New Testament. MESSIAH was this perfect character. Isaiah describes Him as such. Isaiah likewise foresaw how He would be treated, and foretold that He would be “numbered with transgressors;” despised and rejected, by the very people who were eye-witnesses of His upright and benevolent conduct. And thus, in fact, it proved. When Jesus was upon earth, true virtue and goodness were displayed; and thereby, the wickedness of man became signally conspicuous. For they, among whom He was

conversant, “preferred a robber and a murderer to Him” (John 18:40) They preferred Barabbas, who had been justly doomed to die for enormous crimes; and they nailed Jesus to the cross in his stead.

When MESSIAH appeared, the Jews professed to blame the wickedness of their forefathers, who had opposed and slain the prophets. If they regretted the ill-treatment the “servants” of God had formerly received, might it not be hoped that “they would reverence His Son?” (Matthew 21:37), concerning whom, under this character of MESSIAH, their expectations were raised by the Scriptures which were read in their synagogues every Sabbath-day?

But “He was despised and rejected of men.” Angels sang praises at His birth, “but men despised Him.” He took not upon Him the nature of angels, but of man; “yet men rejected him.” Sinful, helpless men, “rejected and despised” the only Saviour. “He came to His own, but His own received Him not.” How lamentable and fatal was their obstinacy! Pretended messiahs were eagerly regarded and followed by them (John 5:43), but the true MESSIAH “was despised and rejected of men!”

Let us consider the clauses of our text separately, in the order in which we read them,

1. “He was despised and rejected of men.” It would be a great mistake to imagine that the Jews were the only people capable of this ingratitude and obstinacy. If any person here thinks, Surely I would not have despised Him, had I seen His wonderful works, and heard Him speak as never man spake; possibly that thought may prove you to be of the very same spirit with those who, while they thirsted for His blood, ignorantly presumed that, if they had lived in the days of their fore-fathers, they would not have joined with them in persecuting the prophets (Matthew 23:31). The prejudices which operated so strongly against our Lord’s mission and ministry, were not peculiar to the people of one age, or country, but such as are deeply rooted in the nature of fallen man. The same principles which influenced the Jews to oppose and

despise His person, still influence multitudes to slight and oppose the doctrine which He taught, and which He commanded His disciples to preach, and to perpetuate to the end of the world. In proof of this, it will be sufficient to assign some of the principal causes of the contempt and hatred which He met with from the men of that generation.

(1). They “despised Him” for, what they accounted, the meanness of His appearance. Though rich in Himself, He became poor for our sakes, and His poverty made Him contemptible in their eyes. They expected MESSIAH would appear with external pomp and power. But when they saw Him, they scorned Him, saying, “Is not this the carpenter’s son?” (Matthew 13:55) He who had not money to pay the tribute demanded of Him (Matthew 17:27), nor a house wherein to lay His head, was of small esteem with those who were covetous, proud of worldly distinctions, and fond of the praise and admiration of men.

(2). Their contempt was heightened when this poor man publicly asserted His proper character and claim, demanded their attention and homage, and styled Himself in a peculiar sense “the Son of God,” “the resurrection and the Life” (John 5:18; 11:25). For this seeming inconsistency between the appearance He made, and the honours He affirmed, they treated Him as a demoniac and a madman (John 10:20) Their language strongly expressed their sentiments of Him, when they asked Him with disdain, “Art thou greater than our father Abraham? Whom makest thou thyself?” (John 8:53).

(3). They objected to Him the low state and former characters of His followers . Some of them were of low rank in life. The most of those who constantly attended Him were poor fishermen. Others had been of bad repute, publicans and open sinners. For this they reproached Him, and thought they were fully justified in their contempt, while they could say, “Have any of the rulers or Pharisees believed on Him?” (John 7:48).

(4). They were farther exasperated against Him, by the “authority” and severity with which He taught. It is true, He was

gentle and meek to all who felt their need of His help, or sincerely desired His instruction. He received them without exception, and treated them with the greatest tenderness. But He vindicated the honour of the law of God, from the corrupt doctrine and tradition of their professed teachers. He exposed and unmasked the hypocrisy of their most admired characters, and compared the men who were in the highest reputation, for wisdom and sanctity, to whited sepulchres, warning the people against them as blind guides and deceivers.

(5). These blind guides strengthened the prejudices of their blind followers against Him, by misrepresentation. They attempted to avail themselves of the Scripture, when they thought it would serve their purpose. They, eagerly, made the most of a prevailing mistake, that Jesus was born in Galilee, because He was brought up in Nazareth from His infancy. This they urged as a proof that He could not be the MESSIAH, whom the prophets had declared was to be born at Bethlehem in Judea. When He healed diseases on the Sabbath day, they represented the effects of His compassion, as a breach of that strict observance of the Sabbath, which was enjoined by the law of Moses, and that therefore He could not be of God (John 9:16). And when they were not able to deny the reality of His wonderful works, they ascribed them to the agency of Satan (Matthew 12:24). We, at this distance of time, can easily perceive the folly, and madness of their attempts. But the Scribes and Pharisees were the public, authorized doctors and teachers of the people, and were supported by the ecclesiastical and civil power; or, as we should now express it, by church and state. The people were not apt to suspect their leaders, whom they thought wiser, and better than themselves. Or, if sometimes they hesitated, were impressed by the majesty of His words, or the evidence of His miraculous works, and constrained to say, "Is not this the Son of David?" (Matthew 12:23), they were soon intimidated and silenced by canons and laws. For it was carefully enacted, in order to keep them in subjection, that whoever acknowledged

Him “should be put out of the synagogue” (John 9:22; 12:42); that is, according to our modern language, excommunicated. This among the Jews, as it has often since been among Christians, was a punishment which drew after it terrible consequences. A man must be in good earnest, or rather taught and supported by the grace of God, who could resist such arguments as these.

These things are easily applicable to the church history of succeeding times. The Gospel of Christ has often been, and is to this day, rejected and despised upon similar grounds. Its simplicity and plainness, and the manner of its proposal, adapted to the use and capacity of the vulgar, offend those who are wise in their own conceit, and proud of their understanding and taste. At the same time they are equally disgusted by the sublimity [high spiritual and moral worth] of its doctrines, which will not submit to the test of their vain reasonings, and can only be received by humble faith. The faithfulness and freedom which its ministers are enjoined to use, give great offence likewise. And because they cannot comply with the humours of those, who wish them to prophesy smooth things, and deceits, they are accounted censorious, and uncharitable, and disturbers of the public peace. Again, the dislike and opposition it frequently meets with from persons of great titles and high stations, deter multitudes from pursuing those inquiries, which some conviction of the truth would prompt them to, were they not discouraged by the fear of consequences. How often has the dread of the displeasure of doctors, bishops, universities, councils, and popes, or an ignorant, slavish deference to their judgments or decisions, prevented people from following that light, which had begun to force itself upon their consciences? How few among those of reputation for wisdom and learning, how few of the great, and opulent, have encouraged, or espoused, the doctrine of the cross? It is, therefore, more properly, a subject for lamentation, than for wonder, that this way is despised, “and almost everywhere spoken against” (Acts 28:22). Farther, as the bulk of those who embrace it are of low condition, so, many of them, are as free to

confess to the praise of the grace of God, as others can be to urge it to their reproach, that till they knew and received this despised Gospel, their characters and practices were vile. Lastly, what unhappy subtlety has been employed, in a way of reason and argument, with an appeal to detached and perverted passages of Scripture, to misrepresent the work of the Holy Spirit, as folly, hypocrisy, or enthusiasm [fanaticism]; and even to charge the Gospel itself with giving encouragement to licentious conduct? In short, the spirit of the world, the arts and influence of designing men, are so powerful, that what our Lord said in Judea, holds equally true in Christendom, “Blessed is he who is not offended in Me!” (Matthew 11:6).

I have reserved, to a distinct paragraph, the mention of one cause why the Gospel is frequently despised and reproached. Because though it be no less unjust or unreasonable, than those which I have recited, it is more immediately incumbent upon all who name the name of Christ, to prevent it as much as possible; I mean, the scandal which arises from the miscarriages of those who profess it. Offences of this kind must come, “but woe to them by whom they come” (Matthew 18:7). There were pretended Christians, even in the apostles’ times, who were “enemies to the cross of Christ” (Philippians 3:18), and by their evil conduct, caused the ways of truth to be evil spoken of. And, therefore, we cannot be surprised that there are such persons now. But “you that love the LORD, hate evil” (Psalm 97:10). There are many who watch for your halting, and are ready to say, There! there! so “we would have it.” It will be in vain for ministers to declare that the doctrines of grace are doctrines according to godliness, unless our testimony is supported by the tempers and conduct of the people: the world will probably judge, rather by what they see in you, than what they hear from us. Nor will it suffice that they cannot say you are an adulterer, a drunkard, a miser, or a cheat. If you espouse our doctrine, they will expect you to be humble, meek, patient, and benevolent; to find integrity in all your dealings, and a punctual discharge of

your duty in every branch of relative life. What must the world think of our principles, if they who avow them are fretful, envious, censorious, discontented, slothful, or unfaithful; or, if they are niggardly and hard-hearted, or voluptuous and dissolute, or implacable and revengeful! They who thus “lay stumbling-blocks before the blind” (Leviticus 19:14), and confirm the prejudices of the ignorant, will have much to answer for.

2. It is farther said, He was “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.” He was surrounded with sorrows on every side, and grief was His intimate, inseparable companion. Surely, this consideration, if any, will animate us “to endure the cross, and to despise the shame” we may be exposed to for His sake. The illustration of this subject will offer more fully in the next sequel. It shall suffice, at present, to offer three causes for His continual sorrows.

(1). The outward course of life, to which He submitted for the sake of sinners, exposed Him to want, weariness, contempt, and opposition; and though His resignation, and patience were perfect, yet He was truly a man, and partaker of our nature with all its affections and sensibilities, which do not imply sin. His feelings, therefore, were human, similar to our own in similar circumstances, and were often painfully exercised. Once and again, we read that He was hungry and had no food; He was thirsty and was nearly refused a little water to drink, when wearied with His journeying in the heat of the day (Matthew 4:2; 21:18; John 4:9). His character was aspersed, His person despised, His words insidiously wrested, His actions misrepresented. He was misunderstood even by His friends, betrayed by one disciple, denied by another, and forsaken by the rest (John 7:5) It is hardly possible for His followers to meet with any outward trial, which may not remind them, of some part of the history of their Lord and Master, who left them “an example” of suffering, that they “should” cheerfully “follow His steps” (1 Peter 2:21).

(2). His perfect knowledge and foresight of those sufferings,

which we, emphatically, call His Passion. How often does He speak of them, and describe the circumstances as if they were actually present? Futurity, is, in mercy, concealed from us. It would often bereave us from all present comfort, if we knew, what the next year, or, perhaps, what the next day would bring forth. If some of you, could have foreseen, many years ago, what you have since been brought through, you would probably have sunk under the apprehension; or, the stoutest of us, might sink now, if we were certainly to know what may be yet before us. But Jesus, long before He made atonement for our sins, had counted the cost. And though His love determined Him to save us, the prospect which was continually present to His view, of the approaching unutterable agonies of His soul, of all that He must endure from God, from the powers of darkness and from wicked men, when He should “be made a curse for us to redeem us from the curse of the law” (Galatians 3:13); I say, this tremendous prospect, was, doubtless, a perpetual source of sorrow.

(3). The frame of His spirit. Whoever has a measure of the mind that was in Christ, must be proportionally burdened and grieved, like righteous Lot in Sodom (2 Peter 2:8), with the wickedness around him, if he lives in society. Who that has any regard for the honour of God, or the souls of men, can bear to see what passes every hour; how the authority of God is affronted, His goodness abused, and His mercy despised, without emotions of grief and compassion? If we are spiritually-minded, we must be thus affected; and we should be more so, if we were more spiritual. But the holiness of MESSIAH, and, consequently, His hatred of sin, was absolutely perfect. His view of the guilt and misery of sinners, was likewise comprehensive and clear. How must He be therefore grieved by the wickedness and insensibility of those with whom He daily conversed! especially as He not only observed the outward conduct of men, but had an intimate knowledge of the evil heart, which is hidden from us. In this sense, His sufferings and sorrows began with His early years, and continued throughout the whole of His life. He undoubtedly

could say, with an emphasis peculiar to Himself, “I beheld the transgressors, and was grieved;” “rivers of waters ran down my eyes, because men keep not Thy law” (Psalm 119:136, 158).

We call ourselves the servants and followers of Him who was despised of men, and encompassed with sorrows. And shall we then “seek great things for ourselves?” (Jeremiah 45:5) as if we belonged to the present world, and expected no portion beyond it? Or shall we be tremblingly alive to the opinion of our fellow-creatures, and think it a great hardship, if it be our lot to suffer shame for His sake, who endured the cross and despised the shame for us? Rather may we account such disgrace our glory, and every loss and suffering, that we may endure for Him, a gain. While on the other hand, we learn with the Apostle Paul, to esteem every gain and honour this world can afford, “to be but loss, and dung,” in comparison of “the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus our Lord” (Philippians 3:8).

18. Voluntary Suffering

“I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting”
Isaiah 50:6.

That which often passes amongst men for resolution, and the proof of a noble, courageous spirit, is, in reality, the effect of a weak and little mind. At least, it is chiefly owing to the presence of certain circumstances, which have a greater influence upon the conduct, than any inherent principle. Thus may persons who appear to set death and danger at defiance in the hour of battle, while they are animated by the examples of those around them, and instigated by a fear of the punishment or shame they would incur if they deserted their post; upon a change of situation, as for instance, on a bed of sickness, discover no traces of the heroism for which they were before applauded, but tremble at the leisurely approach of death, though they were thought to despise it under a different form. It was not true fortitude, it was rather a contemptible pusillanimity [cowardice], that determined the

celebrated * Cato to destroy himself. He was afraid of Caesar; his dread of him, after his victories, was so great, that he durst not look him in the face; and, therefore, he killed himself to avoid him. We may confidently ascribe the pretended gallantry of modern duellists to the same meanness of sentiment. They fight, not because they are not afraid of death, but because they are impelled by another fear, which makes a greater impression upon a feeble, irresolute mind. They live upon the opinion of their fellow-creatures, and feel themselves too weak to bear the contempt they should meet with, from the circle of their acquaintance, if they should decline acting upon the false principles of honour which pride and folly have established. They have not resolution sufficient, to act the part which conscience and reason would dictate, and, therefore, hazard life, and every thing that is dear to them, as men, rather than dare to withstand the prevalence of an absurd and brutal custom.

* Marcus Porcius Cato Uticensis (95-46 BC), known as Cato the Younger, was a politician and statesman in the late Roman Republic.

A patient enduring of affliction, and especially of disgrace and contempt, to which the characters the world most admire are confessedly unequal, is a much surer proof of true fortitude, than any of those actions which the love of praise, the fear of man, or even a mercenary attachment to lucre, are capable of producing. True Magnanimity is evidenced by the real importance of the end it proposes, and by the steadiness by which it pursues the proper means of attaining that end; undisturbed and unwearied by difficulty, danger, or pain, and equally indifferent to the censure or scorn of incompetent judges. This greatness of mind is essential and peculiar to the character of the Christian. I mean the Christian who deserves the name. His ends are great and sublime, to glorify God, to obtain nearer communion with Him, and to advance in conformity to His holy will. To attain these ends, he employs the means prescribed by the Lord, he waits at Wisdom's gates (Proverbs 8:34), and walks in the paths of dependence and

obedience. He, therefore, cannot conform to the prevailing maxims and pursuits of the many, and is liable to be hated and scorned for his singularity. But he neither courts the smiles of men, nor shrinks at the thought of their displeasure. He loves his fellow-creatures, and is ready to do them every kind office in his power; but he cannot fear them, because he fears the Lord God.

But this life the Christian “lives by faith in the Son of God” (Galatians 2:20); Jesus is the source of his wisdom and strength. He, likewise, is his Exemplar. He is crucified to the world by the cross of Christ; and a principal reason of his indifference to the opinion of the world, is the consideration of the manner in which his Lord was treated by it. He is the follower of Him who said, “I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting.”

We may observe from the words, that the humiliation of MESSIAH was voluntary, and that it was extreme.

1. With respect to His engagement, as the Mediator between God and sinners, a great work was given Him to do, and He became responsible; and, therefore, in this sense, bound, and under obligation. But His compliance was, likewise, voluntary, for He gave Himself up freely to suffer, the just for the unjust. Could He have relinquished our cause, and left us to the deserved consequence of our sins, in the trying hour, when His enemies seized upon Him, then legions of angels, had they been wanted, would have appeared for His rescue (Matthew 26:53). But if He was determined to save others, then His own sufferings were unavoidable. Men, in the prosecution of their designs, often meet with unexpected difficulties in their way; which, though they encounter with some cheerfulness, in hope of surmounting them, and carrying their point at last, are considered as impediments; but the sufferings of MESSIAH, were essentially necessary to the accomplishment of His great designs, and precisely determined, and present to His view beforehand, so that (as I lately observed) there was not a single circumstance that happened to Him,

unawares. He knew that no blood but His own could make atonement for sin, that nothing less than His humiliation could expiate our pride; that if He did not thus suffer, sinners must inevitably perish; and, therefore, (such was His love!) He cheerfully and voluntarily “gave His back to the smiters, and His cheeks to them that plucked off the hair.” Two designs of vast importance filled His mind, the completion of them was that joy set before Him, for the sake of which He “made Himself of no reputation,” “endured the cross, and despised the shame.” These were, the glory of God, and the salvation of sinners.

(1). The highest end of His mediation was to display the glory of the divine character in the strongest light, to afford to all intelligent creatures (Ephesians 3:10), the brightest manifestation they are capable of receiving, of the manifold wisdom of God, His holiness, justice, truth, and love, the stability and excellence of His moral government, all mutually illustrating each other, as combined and shining forth in His person, and in His mediatorial work. Much of the glory of God may be seen, by an enlightened eye, in creation; much in His providential rule and care over His creatures; but the brightness of His glory (John 1:18; Hebrews 1:3), the express and full discovery of His perfections, can only be known by Jesus Christ, and the revelation which God has given of Himself, to the world, by Him. And, accordingly, we are assured, that the angels, whose knowledge of the natural world is, doubtless, vastly superior to ours, desire to look into these things; and that the manifold wisdom of God is super-eminently made known to principalities and powers, in heaven, by the dispensation of His grace to the Church redeemed from the earth.

(2). Subordinate to this great design, closely connected with it, and the principal effect for which it will be admired and magnified to eternity, is the complete and everlasting salvation of that multitude of miserable sinners, who, according to the purpose of God, and by the working of His mighty power, shall believe in this Saviour; and who, renouncing every other hope, shall put their trust in Him, upon the warrant of the promise and

command of God, and yield themselves to be His willing and devoted people. Many are their tribulations in the present life, but they shall be delivered out of them all; they shall overcome, they shall be more than conquerors, “by the blood of the Lamb, and by the Word of His testimony” (Revelation 12:11); and then they shall shine, like the sun, in the Kingdom of Heaven. The consummation of their happiness, is a branch of the joy which was set before Him. For their sakes, that they might be happy, that He may be admired in them, and by them, to the glory of God, who is all in all, He voluntarily substituted Himself to sufferings and death. He endured the cross, and He despised the shame. “He gave His back to the smiters, His cheeks to them that plucked off the hair, He hid not His face from shame and spitting.”

2. But are we reading a prophecy, or the history of His extreme humiliation? It is a prophecy; how literally and exactly it was fulfilled, we learn from His history by the Evangelists. With what cruelty, with what contempt was He treated, first by the servants in the hall of the High Priest, afterwards by the Roman soldiers! Let us consider Him, “who endured the contradiction of sinners against Himself” (Hebrews 12:3). These words of the Apostle suggest some preliminary observations, to prepare our minds for receiving a due impression, from the several particulars mentioned here.

When the Apostle would dispose believers by an argument or motive (which, if we fully understood it, would render all other arguments unnecessary) to endure sufferings and crosses patiently; he says, “Consider Him”—he uses a word which is properly a mathematical term, denoting the ratio or proportion between different numbers, or figures:—compare yourselves with Him, and His sufferings with your own,—consider who He is, no less than what He endured.

In the apprehensions of men, insults are aggravated, in proportion to the disparity between the person who receives, and who offers them. A blow, from an equal, is an offence, but will be still more deeply resented from an inferior. But if a subject, a

servant, a slave, should presume to strike a king, it would justly be deemed an enormous crime. But Jesus, the King of kings, and Lord of lords, whom all the angels of God worship, made Himself so entirely of no reputation, that the basest of the people, the servants, the common soldiers, were not afraid to make Him the object of their derision, and to express their hatred in the most sarcastic and contemptuous manner. It is said that He endured the contradiction of “sinners.” So, perhaps, do we; but we are sinners likewise, and deserve much more than we suffer, if not immediately from the instruments of our grief, yet from the Lord, who has a right to employ what instruments He pleases, to afflict us for our sins. This thought quieted the spirit of David, when his own son rose up against his life, and his own servant cursed him to his face (2 Samuel 16:11) But Jesus was holy, harmless, and undefiled—He had done nothing amiss; yet the usage He met with was such, as has seldom been offered to the vilest malefactor. Their cruel and scornful contradiction was, likewise, expressly and directly against “Himself,” whereas His people only suffer from unreasonable and wicked men, for His sake, and for their professed attachment to “Him.” In the most violent persecutions, they who could be prevailed on to renounce His name, and His cause, usually escaped punishment, and were frequently favoured and rewarded. And this is still the ground of the world’s displeasure; fierce and bitter as their opposition may seem, the way to reconciliation is always open; they are not angry with us farther than we avow a dependence upon Him, and show ourselves determined to obey Him, rather than men. If we could forsake Him, their resentment would be disarmed, for they mean no more than to intimidate us from His service. I do not think that they who make peace with the world upon these terms, are esteemed by them for their compliance, but they are seldom disturbed any longer. It is plain, therefore, that if we suffer as Christians, it is for His sake. He likewise suffered for our sake, but how wide is the difference between Him and us! We, when the trial is sharp, are in danger of flinching from the cause of our

best friend and benefactor, to whom our obligations are so innumerable, and so immense; whereas He gave Himself up to endure such things for us, when we were strangers and enemies! He was not only treated with cruelty, but with every mark of the utmost detestation and scorn, which wanton, unfeeling, unrestrained barbarity could suggest.

(1). They began to “spit upon Him” in the High Priest’s hall. The Roman soldiers likewise did “spit upon Him,” when they had contemptuously arrayed Him in a scarlet robe, and bowed the knee before Him, in mockery of His title of King. Great as an insult of this kind would be deemed amongst us, it was considered as still greater, according to the customs prevalent in the eastern countries. There, to spit, even in the presence of a person, though it were only upon the ground, conveyed the idea of disdain and abhorrence. But the lowest of the people spit “in the face” of the Son of God. No comparison can fully illustrate this indignity. There is some proportion between the greatest earthly monarch, and the most abject slave. They did not spit upon Alexander, or Caesar, but upon the Lord of glory.

(2). They “buffeted and beat Him on the face,” and when He meekly offered His cheeks to their blows, “they plucked off the hair.” The beard was in those times accounted honourable; and when David’s servants were shaven by the command of Hanun (2 Samuel 10:5), they were ashamed to be seen. But Jesus was not shaven. With savage violence they tore off the hair of His beard; while He, like a sheep before His shearers, was dumb and quietly yielded Himself to their outrages.

(3). “His back” they “tore with scourges,” as was foretold by the Psalmist—“The plowers plowed upon my back, they made long their furrows” (Psalm 129:3). The Jewish council condemned Him to death for blasphemy, because He said He was the Son of God. Stoning was the punishment prescribed by the law of Moses, in such cases (Leviticus 24:16). But this death was not sufficiently lingering and tormenting to gratify their malice. To glut their insatiable cruelty, they were therefore willing to

own their subjection to the Roman power to be so absolute, that it was not lawful for them to put anyone to death (John 18:31), according to their own judicial law; and thus wilfully, though unwittingly, they fulfilled the prophecies. They preferred the punishment which the Romans appropriated to slaves who were guilty of flagitious [shamefully wicked] crimes, and therefore insisted that He should be crucified. According to the Roman custom, those who were crucified, were previously scourged. Thus when they had mocked Him, and made Him their sport, by putting a crown of thorns upon His head, and a reed in His hand for a sceptre, in derision of His Kingly Office, He was stripped and scourged. It was not infrequent for the sufferers to expire under the severity and torture of scourging. And we may be certain that Jesus experienced no lenience from their merciless hands. The plowers plowed His back. But more and greater tortures were before Him. He was engaged to make a full atonement for sin, by His sufferings; and as He had power over His own life, He would not dismiss His spirit until He could say, "It is finished."

And now, to use the words of Pilate, "Behold the man!" (John 19:5). Oh! for a realizing impression of this extreme humiliation and suffering, that we may be duly affected with a sense of His love to sinners, and of the evil of our sins, which rendered it necessary that the Surety should thus suffer! Behold "the Lamb of God," mocked, blindfolded, spit upon, and scourged! Let us add to all this, the consideration of His praying for His tormenters (Luke 23:34), and we have an example of perfect magnanimity.

Shall we therefore refuse to suffer shame for His sake, and be intimidated by the frowns or contempt of men, from avowing our attachment to Him! Ah! Lord, we are, indeed, capable of this baseness and ingratitude. But, if Thou art pleased to strengthen us with the power of Thy Spirit, we will account such disgrace our glory. Then we will not hang down our heads and despond, but will rather rejoice and be exceeding glad, if the world revile us

and persecute us, and speak all manner of evil against us, provided it be falsely (Matthew 5:11), and provided it be for Thy sake!

Shall we continue in sin (Romans 6:1), after we know what it cost Him, to expiate our sins? God forbid! When Mark Antony addressed the citizens of Rome, to animate them to avenge the death of Caesar, he enlarged upon Caesar's character, his great actions, his love to the Roman people, and the evidence he had given of it, in the donations and bequests he had appointed them in his will, the particulars of which he specified. When he had thus engaged their admiration and gratitude, and they discovered emotions of regret and sensibility, that Caesar, the greatest character in Rome, who had fought and triumphed for them, and had remembered them in his will, should be slain, Antony drew aside the cloth, and showed them his dead body, covered with wounds and blood. This sight rendered it needless to say more. The whole assembly united as one man, to search out, and to destroy his murderers. The application is obvious. May our hearts, from this hour, be filled with a determined, invariable resentment against sin, the procuring cause of the humiliation and death of our best Friend and Benefactor!

The eighth of twenty booklets.

