

Sermons of John Newton

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

Booklet Fifteen

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- 33. Opposition to Messiah Unreasonable - Psalm 2:1-3
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33. Opposition to Messiah Unreasonable,

34. Opposition to Messiah in Vain and

35. Opposition to Messiah Ruinous

33. Opposition to Messiah Unreasonable

“Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against His Anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us” Psalm 2:1-3.

It is generally admitted, that the institutes of Christianity, as contained in the New Testament, do at least exhibit a beautiful and salutary system of morals; and that a sincere compliance with the precepts of our Lord and His apostles, would have a good effect upon society. Few infidels have ventured to contradict the common sense of mankind, so far as to deny this. Nor can it be denied that the Author of this institution [referring to Christianity], (if we judge by the history and character given of Him by the evangelists), exemplified, in the highest perfection by His own conduct, the precepts which He enjoined to His followers. While He lived as a man amongst men, the tenor of His behaviour was such as became the Friend of mankind. Though He submitted to a low estate, and often suffered hunger, thirst, and weariness, we do not read of His having wrought a single miracle merely for His own relief. But the wants and calamities of others continually excited His compassion, and engaged His assistance. He gave sight to the blind, health to the sick, and sometimes wiped away the tears of mourners by restoring their dead to life. He endured hunger Himself; but, once and again, provided food for multitudes, lest they, having nothing to eat, should faint by the way. Nor did He confine His acts of benevolence to His followers, but was easy of access, and granted the requests of all indiscriminately, who applied to Him. “He went about doing good” (Acts 10:38), and

often put Himself in the way of those who would not otherwise have known Him. And though He was opposed, calumniated [slandered], and laughed to scorn, He continued unwearied, and determined in the same cause, bestowing benefits on all around Him, as occasions offered, and returning good for evil. May we not with reason ask, Why then did Jews and Heathens, priests and people, scribes and Sadducees, rage so furiously against Him who did nothing amiss, who did all things well? Why did persons of the most opposite interests, parties, and sentiments, who could agree in nothing else, so cordially [heartily] agree in opposing MESSIAH?

His Gospel breathes the spirit of the great Author, and has a direct tendency to make men happy and useful. Wherever it was published, in the first age, among the heathens, many of them turned from the worship of dumb idols, to serve the living and true God. It taught and enabled them to renounce “ungodliness and worldly lusts, and to live soberly, righteously, and godly” (Titus 2:12); and it still produces the same effects. The world now bears the name Christian, but under this new and honourable name, it retains the same spirit as formerly. Many who are called Christian, are no less under the power of evil tempers and evil habits, than the heathens to whom the apostles preached. But where the Gospel of the grace of God reaches the heart, a real and observable change is produced. The profane person learns to fear an oath, the libertine [unrestrained, debauched person] is reclaimed, the drunkard becomes sober, and the miser kind. Wherever the truth of the Gospel is known and received, instances may be found of persons who were a terror and a burden to their families, being delivered from the stings of a guilty conscience, from the dominion of headstrong passions, from the slavery of habitual wickedness, and made peaceful, useful, and exemplary members of society, by what the Apostle calls, The preaching of the Cross. And we challenge history to show that an abiding, consistent reformation was ever effected by any other doctrine, in a single province, or city, or village, or even in a single family.

What then shall we say of that zeal which kindled the fire of

persecution against our Lord and His apostles, and His followers through a succession of ages? What is the common principle, the bond of union, which at this day connects people who differ so widely in other respects, and points their displeasure, from all sides, against this one object? In a * former discourse, I briefly mentioned the principal grounds of that dislike which the Jews manifested to MESSIAH'S personal ministry; and I observed that they are deeply rooted in the nature of fallen man, and therefore not peculiar to any one age or nation.

* Volume I, Sermon XVII.

The Gospel always did, and always will, produce the same happy change, in those who receive it; and provoke the same opposition and resentment in those who do not. The actings will be different as circumstances vary, but the principle is universally the same. In this island [Great Britain], which the good Providence of God has distinguished by many signal and peculiar favours; the spirit of our constitution and government is friendly to liberty of conscience, and the rights of private judgment; so that our religious profession does not expose us to the penalties of fire and sword, stripes or tortures, imprisonment or banishment. Such trials have been the lot of our forefathers, when the servants of God, under names of Gospellers, or Puritans, were treated as heretics of the worst sort. We are bound to acknowledge with thankfulness, the blessings of religious and civil liberty which we enjoy. But the world at large around us, is not more favourably disposed to the grace and rule of MESSIAH'S Kingdom, than it was in the days of heathen and Popish darkness. The tongue, at least, is unrestrained, and out of the abundance of the heart the mouth will speak. The Gospel offends the pride of men, by considering them all on a level, as sinners in the sight of God; and by proposing only one way of Salvation, without admitting any difference of plea or character. It offends them likewise by its strictness. Like Herod, they might, perhaps, consent to do many things (Mark 6:20), if they were left at liberty to please themselves in others, in which, though expressly contrary to the will of God, they will not submit to be controlled. And therefore they are much displeased

with the Gospel; which, by affording no allowance or connivance to the least known sin, but prescribing a rule of universal holiness, crosses their inclinations and favourite interests. When Paul preached at Ephesus, Demetrius and his companions perceived that their craft was in danger. This was the real cause of their anger, but they were ashamed to avow it; and therefore their ostensible reason for opposing him, was of a religious kind (Acts 19:28), and they professed a great concern for the honour of Diana. Few, perhaps, would have given themselves much trouble, to promote or preserve the gain of the craftsmen; but a pretended regard for the worship which had long been established, was a popular topic, which wrought powerfully upon the superstition of the ignorant multitude, and thousands were presently induced to join with them in the cry, “Great is Diana of the Ephesians.”

The like arts are still practiced, with the like success. The same secret motives, are disguised by the same plausible pretences. The deceitfulness and wickedness of the heart appears in no one instance more plainly, than in the cavils which are repeated and multiplied against the grace of the Gospel. When we preach a free Salvation by faith in Jesus, and propose His obedience unto death, as the sure and only ground of acceptance with God; when we say, in the words of the Apostle, to the vilest of sinners who feel the burden, and fear the consequences of their sins, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:31), and alarm is raised, and a concern pretended for the interests of morality. The doctrine of salvation by faith only, is charged with opening a door, a flood-gate for licentiousness; and it is supposed, that if this doctrine be true, people may live as they please, and still comfort themselves with the expectation of heaven at last. Considering our natural propensity to trust in ourselves that we are righteous, I do not wonder that persons who are comparatively sober and decent, should speak thus, while they are ignorant of the strictness of the holy Law of God, and of the depravity of their own hearts. But I sometimes wonder that they are not a little disconcerted by the characters of so many (so different from what they suppose their own to be) who join them in the objections they

make. For in this point, with the sober and decent, the licentious and profligate readily concur; and whoremongers, adulterers, drunkards, and profane swearers, almost equal them in gravely expressing their apprehensions, that the doctrine of Salvation by Grace, will prove very unfavourable to the practice of good works. How very remarkable is this—that the virtuous and the vile, the most respectable and the most infamous people, should so frequently agree in sentiment, and unite in opposing the Gospel, professedly from the same motive. But thus it was at the commencement of MESSIAH’S Kingdom—kings, rulers, priests, and people, all conspired and raged against Him. Herod and Pilate, the Jewish elders and the Roman soldiers, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, thus differed, and thus agreed. They hated each other till He appeared; but their greater common hatred of Him, made them act in concert, and they suspended their mutual animosity, that they might combine to destroy Him.

I may seem to have digressed from the immediate scope of my text, but I judge it proper to bring the subject home to ourselves. If I confined myself to prove that the enemies of our Lord, when He was upon earth, were very unreasonable and unjust in treating Him as they did, I should have an easy talk, and, I suppose, the ready assent of all my hearers. But there may be persons present, who, though they little suspect themselves, are equally misled by prejudices; and under a semblance of zeal for a form of godliness, oppose the truth and power of it, upon the same principles and in the same spirit, as the Jews and heathens did of old. The Jews who condemned MESSIAH to death, blamed their forefathers for persecuting the prophets who foretold His appearance (Matthew 23:30, 31); but their own conduct towards Him was a proof that, had they lived in the days of the prophets, they would have acted as their fathers had done. So the resentment that many who bear the Christian name in this day, discover against the doctrines of the Gospel, and against the people who profess them, is a proof that they would have concurred with those who crucified the Lord of glory, had they lived in Jerusalem at that time.

In this prophecy, David, under the influence of the Holy Spirit,

speaks of the future as actually present. He saw the resistance that would be made to the Person and Kingdom of MESSIAH, by the powers of the world; that they would employ their force and policy to withstand and suppress the decree and appointment of God. The question Why? implies that their opposition would be both groundless and ineffectual.

1. It was entirely groundless and unreasonable. MESSIAH was indeed a King, and He came to set up a Kingdom that should endure for ever. But His Kingdom is not of this world; and, if rightly understood, would give no umbrage to human governments. It does not interfere with the rights of princes. His subjects are indeed primarily bound by the laws of their immediate King, and they must “obey God rather than man” (Acts 5:29), if man will presume to enjoin such laws as contradict His known will. But with this exception, it is a part of the duty they owe to their Lord, to obey those whom He has placed, by His Providence, in authority over them. The Kingdom of MESSIAH has little to do with what we call politics. His people are taught to “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” (Matthew 22:21), and to yield a peaceful subjection to the powers that be, under whatever form of government their lot may be cast. They “are strangers and pilgrims upon earth” (1 Peter 2:11), their citizenship, treasures, and conversation are in heaven; and they have no more direct concern with the intrigues and parties of politicians, than a traveller has in the feuds and disturbances which may happen in a foreign country through which he is passing. They are to obey God, they are to obey kings and governors in subordination to God, they are to render to all their due; “tribute to whom tribute, custom to whom custom, honour to whom honour” (Romans 13:7). But where they cannot comply with the laws of the government, without breaking the laws of God, then they are not to obey, but to suffer patiently, committing their cause to Him whom they serve; well knowing that He is able to protect or relieve them, so far as His wisdom judges it fit, and to make them abundant amends for all they can suffer for His sake. I am not a direct advocate for the doctrines of passive obedience, and non-resistance, in the largest sense. I set a

great value upon the blessings of civil and religious liberty. I reverence the constitutional rights of nations, particularly of our own. But they are all dependant upon the will of our Lord; and I know not by what means they can be preserved to a people, when their sins have made them ripe for judgment. But “let the dead bury their dead” (Matthew 8:22). God will never want instruments, when it is His pleasure to relieve the oppressed, or to abase the proud. For these purposes, He overrules the counsels and affairs of men, pours contempt upon the designs of princes, and takes the wise in their own craftiness. The subject of His spiritual Kingdom have only to commit their cause to Him, to wait upon Him, to observe and to admire His management. Their best interest is always safe. And even the troubles they meet with, are appointed for their good. But if they so far conform to the world, as to take an active and decided part in the disputes and contentions around them, they usually dishonour their Christian character, and obstruct their own peace and comfort. There may possibly be some exceptions. God may sometimes place a servant of His, by the leading of His Providence, in a post of high political importance, as He did Joseph and Daniel, but I believe such instances are few; and if any venture of their own accord, beyond the proper line of their calling, as Christians, the event is usually grief and loss to them. They [believers] are described in His Word, as those “who are quiet in the land” (Psalm 35:20), and such should be their deportment.

We are sure it was thus, in the first and golden days of Christianity. The Roman government was then absolute, arbitrary, and oppressive. Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, and others, who presided over it, and bore the name of Roman emperors, were vile and abominable beyond measure: one of them [one of the Christians] was, by a decree of the Roman senate, sentenced to death as a public enemy to mankind—but the Christians neither disputed their right, nor disobeyed their authority. Kings and rulers, therefore, have nothing to fear from the Gospel of Christ. The maxims of sound policy would engage all their influence in facilitating its progress, for true Christians will assuredly be good

subjects. Impatience of subordination, contempt of lawful authority, tumults, riots, and conspiracies, are evils which would have no place, if the Gospel was generally received. But princes have usually been exposed to the flattery of designing men, who, by their arts and misrepresentations, have seduced them to act contrary to their true interest. Their mistaken efforts to suppress that cause, which if maintained, would have been the best security of their thrones, have often stained the annals of their reign with innocent blood, and filled their dominions with misery. History furnishes many instances of kings who might otherwise have lived beloved, and died lamented, that have involved themselves and their families in the calamities with which they unjustly punished those who deserved their protection. For:

2. Opposition to MESSIAH and His Kingdom is no less vain and ineffectual, than unreasonable and groundless. Nor is it in vain only, but ruinous to those who engage in it. What did the Jews build, when they rejected the Foundation Stone which God had laid in Zion? They acted, as they thought, with precaution and foresight. They said, “If we let Him thus alone, all men will believe on Him; and the Romans shall come and take away both our place and our nation” (John 11:48). Foolish politicians! Did they preserve their city by crucifying the Son of God?! The very evil they feared came upon them. Or rather, being abandoned of God to their own counsels, they brought it upon themselves. In a few years, the Romans with whom they appeared so desirous to keep upon good terms, destroyed their city with an unheard of destruction, and exterminated them from the land. This was an emblem of the inevitable, total, irreparable ruin, which awaits all those who persist in rejecting the rule of MESSIAH. The nation, the individual, that will not serve Him must surely perish.

Ah! If sinners did but know what the bonds and cords are, which they are so determined to break; if they knew that “His service is perfect freedom;” if they were aware what more dreadful bonds and chains they are riveting upon themselves, by refusing His easy yoke, they would throw down their arms and submit. They think, if they yield to the Gospel, they must bid adieu to pleasure. But what

will become of their pleasure when, the day of His forbearance being expired, He will speak to them in His wrath, and fill them with hopeless horror and dismay?

Bless the Lord, ye favoured few, whose eyes are opened, whose hearts are softened, and who are become the willing people of this Saviour. Yet a little while and He will appear again, and then you also shall appear with Him in glory!

34. Opposition to Messiah in Vain

“He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall have them in derision” Psalm 2:4.

The extent and efficacy [effects] of the depravity of mankind cannot be fully estimated by the conduct of heathens destitute of divine revelation. We may say of the Gospel, in one sense, what the Apostle says of the Law, It entered that sin might abound (Romans 5:20). It afforded occasion for displaying the alienation of the heart of man from the blessed God, in the strongest light. The sensuality, oppression and idolatry which have prevailed in all ages, sufficiently prove the wickedness of men to be very great. But the opposition which they who have rebelled against the government of their Creator make to the proposals of His grace, is a proof still more striking. If sin has so hardened their hearts, and blinded their eyes, that of themselves they neither can nor will implore His mercy, yet it might be thought that if the great God whom they have so heinously offended, should be pleased, of His own goodness, to make the first overtures of reconciliation, and to invite them to receive pardon, they would gladly attend to His gracious declaration, especially when they were informed that, to preserve them from perishing, He gave up His only Son to sufferings and death. But when they not only defy His power, but insult His goodness; when they reject and blaspheme the Saviour whom He commends to them; when they are but the more exasperated by His tenders [offers] of mercy; when they scorn His message, and persecute His messengers by whom He entreats them to be reconciled; this mad and ungrateful carriage shows

such a rooted enmity against God in fallen men, as even the fallen angels are not capable of discovering. For MESSIAH “took not on Him the nature of angels,” nor did He make proposals of mercy to them. But He did take upon Him our nature. He visited us in person, for us He lived a Sufferer, and died that we might live.

The prophets foresaw and foretold the reception He would meet with, and their predictions were fulfilled. The Jews, who professed to expect Him, and the heathens who have not heard of Him, united their utmost efforts to withstand and defeat the purposes of His unexampled love. What must the holy angels think of the baseness, presumption, and obstinacy of such creatures!

But rebellion against God is not only wickedness, but folly and infatuation in the extreme. Who ever hardened himself against the Lord and prospered? (Job 9:4). He whom they opposed, and against whom they thought they had prevailed when they saw Him dead upon the cross, soon resumed His glory and His throne. The text, therefore, principally respects the opposition made to His Gospel and to His Kingdom after His ascension, which is still carrying on, but which always was, and always will be, in vain. The words I have read offer two points for the consolation of those who love Him, and for the timely consideration of those who have hitherto disregarded Him.

1. That “He sitteth in the heavens.”

2. That He takes notice of His enemies He smiles at their rage, and treats both their power and their policy with contempt.

1. He whom God has anointed (therefore called MESSIAH) He against whom kings and rulers, nations and people rage, “sitteth in the heavens.” He has finished His great work, and entered into His rest; having by Himself “purged our sins,” He is immovably seated upon His throne, “at the right hand of the Majesty on High” (Hebrews 1:3). He is the Head, King, and Lord of all principalities, dominions, and powers, possessed of all authority, unchangeably fixed over all, “God blessed for evermore” (Romans 9:5). In this character He is the Representative, High Priest, Advocate and Shepherd of all who put their trust in Him. He is

ever mindful of them. While He is preparing a place for them near Himself, by the power of His Spirit He maintains an intercourse with them, and manifests Himself to them as He does not to the world. By His Providence, which rules over all, He manages their concerns upon earth, supplies their wants, and gives them present and effectual help and support in their time of trouble. To Him their eyes and hearts are directed, “they look to Him and are enlightened” (Psalm 34:5), strengthened, and comforted. And under His protection they are safe. He having taken charge of them, and engaged to save them to the uttermost, “no weapon formed against them can prosper.” Now they may draw nigh to God with boldness, for they have One “who ever lives to make intercession for them.” Now they may lay aside all anxious uneasy cares, for they have a mighty Friend who cares for them. Now they may say, each one for himself, “I will trust and not be afraid, for the Lord Jehovah is my strength, and my song, and my salvation” (Isaiah 12:2). Whether you have indeed fled to Him for refuge as the hope set before you, committed your soul to Him, and accepted Him in all His offices, as your Prophet, Priest, and King, is a point of experience; if you have, He knows it; for He enabled you to do it and He will not disappoint the hope and expectation which He Himself has wrought in you. If you have, methinks you must know it likewise. Have you not done it more than once? Do you not daily repeat this surrender of yourself to Him? It is certainly possible to assent to the truths of the Gospel, considered merely as doctrines or propositions, yea to plead and dispute for them with much seeming earnestness, and yet to be entirely a stranger to their power. But I trust that they to whom I now speak will understand me. Our Lord reminded Nathanael of what had passed under the fig tree (John 1:48), when he thought himself alone. Do not I remind you of seasons, when no eye but the eye of Him who sees in secret was upon you? Did not you then and there, once and again, accept Him as your Saviour upon the warrant of His own Word, devote yourself to His service, resign yourself to His disposal, and entrust yourself to His care? Then fear not. He that sitteth in the heavens is on your side. If the

premise be well grounded, the inference is sure. And though many may rise up against you, they shall not prevail, for He will “teach your hands to war, and your fingers to fight,” He will cover your “head in the day of battle,” and in the end “make you more than a conqueror.” For the battle is not yours, but the Lord’s. Your enemies are His, and His cause is yours. They who associate against Him shall be dashed in pieces, as the billows break and die upon a rocky shore.

2. The feebleness and insignificance of their rage against MESSIAH, is intimated by the manner in which He notices their proceedings. “He holds them in derision, He laughs them to scorn.” He has them perfectly under His control, holds them in a chain when they think themselves to be most at liberty, appoints the bounds beyond which they cannot pass, and can in a moment check them, and make them feel His hook and bridle, when in the height of their career.

It is the Lord’s pleasure not only to favour and to support His people, but to do it in such a way that it may be seen that it is wholly His own work, and that the praise belongs to Him alone. And therefore He permits their enemies for a season to try if they can prevent His designs. For a season, things take such a course that their attempts seem to prosper; they threaten, they boast, and confidently expect to carry their point. But the contest always issues in their shame and confusion. He not only disconcerts their schemes, but makes them instrumental to the promoting of His own designs. Thus when He sent Moses to deliver Israel from Egypt, Pharaoh, instead of complying with His command, increased their burdens, added to the rigour of their bondage, and, though rebuked by a succession of severe judgments, he hardened himself the more, and was determined to detain them if he could. But he could not detain them a day or an hour beyond the appointed time, which God had long before made known to Abraham (Exodus 12:41, 42). Then they were delivered, and Pharaoh and his host overthrown in the Red Sea. Hereby the name of the God of Israel was more known, noticed and magnified, than

it would have been if Pharaoh had dismissed the people without reluctance and delay.

In like manner, when MESSIAH left the earth, His followers were considered as sheep without a shepherd. The world conspired to suppress His cause, and to root out the remembrance of His people. But the methods they employed counteracted their own designs. They who were dispersed by the persecution that followed the death of Stephen, preached the Word wherever they went, the Gospel spread from place to place, and the number of disciples daily increased. So that the Jewish rulers soon found themselves unequal to the task, and foreboded their own disappointment, “doubting whereunto these things would grow” (Acts 5:24). In some cases the Lord signally interposed, and showed how entirely the lives and the hearts of His adversaries were in His hands. The haughty Herod was suddenly smitten by an invisible hand, with a loathsome and fatal disease (Acts 12:23). He fell, devoured by worms; but the success of the Gospel, which he had presumed to withstand, greatly increased and spread. The furious zeal of Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9) against the truth, was silenced in a different manner. Jesus, whom he ignorantly persecuted, appeared to him in the way to Damascus, when he was breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples, disarmed his rage, made him a monument of His mercy, and an earnest and successful preacher of the faith he had laboured to destroy.

From the Jews the business was transferred to the heathens, whose opposition was no less unavailing. Though they sometimes affected to boast that they had suppressed the Christian name, the Gospel was propagated in defiance of their attempts to prevent it. The worst and the best of the Roman emperors, were alike industrious, and alike unsuccessful, in their endeavours to stifle the work of God. At length, in the reign of Constantine, the Christian religion obtained the sanction and protection of imperial authority.

But it soon appeared that the religion of the New Testament gained little advantage by this revolution. Though the worship of

heathen idols gradually declined, and sank into disrepute, the bulk of the people of all ranks were only changed in name. The world still lay in wickedness (1 John 5:19), and true Christianity was still exposed to persecution. When the name Christian ceased to be invidious and despicable, new names were soon invented to stigmatize the real servants of God; and ecclesiastical powers gradually increased, till the mystery of iniquity reigned for ages in the temple of God. The persecutions of popery equalled and exceeded those of paganism. And they who aspired to be Christians indeed, were constrained, like the worthies of old, to “wander on mountains and in deserts,” to hide themselves “in dens and caves of the earth” (Hebrews 11:38). Yet, under all disadvantages, there was still a remnant, according to the election of grace, who could not be compelled to wear the mark of the beast. And while persecutors, who could only kill the body, seemed to weaken the Church militant, they increased the number and the songs of the Church triumphant.

To appearance, the Church of Christ was often brought low. It was very low at the time of the Reformation. But then it suddenly was revived, and broke forth like the sun from behind a dark cloud; and the light of the Gospel was diffused far and wide, almost as at the beginning, in the apostles’ days. But the Protestants were quickly actuated by the same spirit, as their popish and pagan predecessors had been. The form of Christianity was professed and protected, and the power of it denied and opposed. And to this day it remains a truth verified by experience, “that all who will live godly in Christ Jesus, must,” in one way or other, “suffer persecution” (2 Timothy 3:12).

Of late years the sanguinary [blood-thirsty; murderous] spirit, which, under pretence of doing God’s service, destroyed His people by fire and tortures, is much subsided. We live in a time when great pretences are made to candour and moderation. We have reason to be thankful to the good Providence of God for our religious liberty. But, so far as men are concerned, we are not indebted for it, to a just sense and acknowledgment of the right of private judgment, but to the prevalence of sceptical indifference

and infidelity. The religion of the Gospel was, perhaps, never more despised and hated than at present. We seem to be returning apace to the state of primitive ages when there were but two sorts of persons—Christians and infidels. But notwithstanding all the arts and assaults of men, whether open enemies or pretended friends, the Bible is still extant [still in existence], the Gospel is still preached, yea, is still spreading. The Lord has always had a people, though they have been often hidden from the general notice and observation of men. “He that sitteth in the heavens” laughs His opposers to scorn, and maintains His own cause in defiance of them all.

Surely if this work was not of God, the united efforts of kings, councils, popes, and philosophers, the great, the wise, the decent, and the profligate, must have overthrown it long ago. If a miracle be demanded in proof of Christianity, behold one! Though the world has been raging and plotting against it, from its first appearance; though it has been fiercely assaulted by those without, and shamefully betrayed by many within, it still subsists, it still flourishes. And subsist it shall, for it is maintained by Him, who has the hearts of all men in His hands, and can control or change them as He pleases. He can, and He will, support and strengthen His people under all their sufferings. He can disappoint His adversaries by unexpected events, divide them among themselves, and so manage them by His Providence, as to make them protect and promote the very cause which they hate. And whenever He pleases He can, as it were, from the stones (Matthew 3:9), raise up instruments to carry on His work, and to show forth His praise. Therefore,

(1). Let not His people tremble for the ark. Our eyes indeed should affect our hearts. It becomes us to be jealous for the LORD of hosts, to be concerned for the contempt and dishonour that is cast upon His government and grace, to be grieved for the abounding abominations of the day, and to pity and pray for obstinate sinners who know not what they do. But we need not fear the failure of His promise. His truth and honour are engaged for the success of His Gospel, and they must stand or fall together.

It is a cause dearer to Him than it can be to us. The manifestation of His glory in the salvation of sinners, by the doctrine of the Cross, is the one great concern, for which the succession of day and night, and of the seasons of the year is continued, and the visible frame of nature is preserved. "He will work, and none shall let it" (Isaiah 43:13). "The kingdoms of the earth shall become the kingdoms of the Lord and of His Christ" (Revelation 11:15). The fullness of the Gentiles shall come in, and the dispersed of Israel shall return to the Lord (Romans 11:25). These great events, to those who judge by an eye of sense, and according to the recent state of things, may appear improbable or impossible. But "the LORD of hosts hath purposed, and who shall disannul it? His hand is stretched out, and who shall turn it back?" (Isaiah 14:27).

(2). Think it neither strange nor hard, if any of you are called to suffer for the sake of the truth. Think it not strange; for thus it has been from the beginning. Think it not hard; for our sufferings are small, if compared with the lot of many who have lived before us. We are not called to resist unto blood. Many prophets and righteous men have desired to see such days of liberty as we are favoured with, but have not seen them.

(3). Consider seriously, "Who is on the Lord's side?" His is the strongest side and must prevail. If you have yielded yourselves to Him, and taken upon you His yoke, your best interests are safe, your final happiness is secured. Nothing can separate you from His love. You shall be kept by His power through faith, "and no weapon formed against you shall prosper." But if you are against Him, tremble; for the Day of His Wrath will come, it will "burn like an oven, and all the proud, and all that do wickedly shall be as stubble, and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, and shall leave them neither root nor branch" (Malachi 4:1). Turn therefore in time from your evil ways, submit yourselves unto Him, and implore His mercy while He waits to be gracious, "that iniquity may not be your ruin."

35. Opposition to Messiah Ruinous

"Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; Thou shalt dash

them in pieces like a potter's vessel" Psalm 2:9.

There is a species of the sublime in writing, which seems peculiar to the Scripture, and of which, properly, no subjects but those of divine revelation are capable, With us, things inconsiderable in themselves are elevated by splendid images, which give them an apparent importance beyond what they can justly claim. Thus the poet, when describing a battle among bees, by a judicious selection of epithets and figures, excites in the minds of his readers, the idea of two mighty armies contending for empire. But the works and ways of God are too great in themselves, to admit of any heightening representation. We conceive more forcibly of small things by illustrations borrowed from those which are greater; but the Scripture frequently illustrates great things by contrasting them with those, which in our estimation, are trivial and feeble. One instance out of many which might be mentioned, is that truly sublime passage of the prophet, "And all the host of heaven shall be dissolved; and the heavens shall be rolled together as a scroll; and all their host shall fall down as the leaf falleth off from the vine, and as a falling fig from the fig-tree" (Isaiah 34:4). The Apostle, when favoured with a heavenly vision, introduces the same thought, almost in the same words. "And the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig-tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind: and the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together" (Revelation 6:13, 14). Such forms of expression are becoming [proper; belonging to the character of] the Majesty of the great God, before whom the difference between the great and the small in our judgment, is annihilated. In His view, all the inhabitants of the earth are but as a drop which falls unnoticed from the bucket, or as the dust which cleaves to the balance (Isaiah 40:15), without affecting its equilibrium. At the same time, the simplicity of these illustrations, so well suited to confound the pride of the wise, is striking and obvious to the lowest capacities. If * Homer or * Virgil had been asked to describe the exertion and effect of the power of God, in subduing

and punishing His enemies, they would probably have laboured for a simile sufficiently grand. But I much question if they would have thought of the image in my text, though none can be more expressive of utter irreparable ruin, or of the ease with which it is accomplished. “He shall dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel” (Psalm 2:9).

* Homer - Greek poet (8th century BC) * Virgil - Roman poet (70-19BC).

The series of the passages, we have lately considered, is very regular and beautiful. MESSIAH “ascended on high, and received gifts for men.” The first and immediate consequence of His exaltation in our nature is the publication of the Gospel. Then follows the happy and beneficial influence of the Gospel on those who thankfully receive it. “How beautiful are the feet of them that preach these glad tidings.” The next passage secures and describes its extensive progress—“The sound went forth into all the earth.” The opposition awakened by it is there described, as unreasonable, “Why do the Heathen rage?” as ineffectual, “the Lord laughs” at His opposers; He sits upon His immovable throne, and derides their attempts. The final issue of their mad resistance, their confusion and ruin, is the subject of the verse I have read, which prepares for the close of the second part of the Oratorio. His enemies shall perish, His Kingdom shall be established and consummated. And then all holy intelligent beings shall join in a song of triumph, “Hallelujah, for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth.”

The two expressions of “breaking with a rod of iron” and “dashing in pieces” suggest nearly the same idea. But as elsewhere He is said to “rule” His enemies “with a rod of iron” (Revelation 19:15). I shall avail myself of this variation, in order to give you a more complete view of the dreadful state of those who oppose MESSIAH and His Kingdom. He rules them at present “with a rod of iron,” and hereafter He will “dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.” Let us, therefore, consider:

1. How the Lord MESSIAH rules over impenitent and obstinate

sinner in the present life. They attempt (in vain) to withdraw from His subjection. They oppose His holy will. They refuse to submit to His golden sceptre. He will, therefore, “rule them with a rod of iron.” For though they boast of their liberty, and presume to say “Who is Lord over us?” (Psalm 12:4), yet in the thing wherein they speak proudly, “He is above them” (Exodus 18:11). They cannot hide themselves from His notice, nor avoid the intimations of His displeasure.

(1). One branch of His iron rule over them, consists in that certain and inseparable connection, which He has established between sin and misery. “The fruit of righteousness is peace” (James 3:18). They who live in the fear of the Lord, and yield a willing obedience to His Word, not only possess a peace of conscience, and a hope which can look with comfort beyond the grave; but are thereby preserved from innumerable evils, into which they who attempt to cast off His yoke, unavoidably plunge themselves. On the contrary, “the way of the transgressors is hard” (Proverbs 13:15). It is hard in itself, if we set aside, for a moment, the consideration of the dreadful end to which it leads. If you could see what passes within the breast of a man who disdains to be governed by the rule of God’s Word, you would see his heart torn to pieces by the clamorous, insatiable demands of the various, violent, inconsistent appetites and passions, which, like so many wild beasts, are continually preying upon him. Not one of them can be fully gratified, much less all, for many of them are diametrically opposite to each other. The boilings of anger, the gnawing of envy, the thirst of covetousness, the anxieties attendant on pride and ambition, must make the mind that is subject to them, miserable. “There is no peace to the wicked;” there can be none. Farther, their evil tempers and irregular desires produce outward and visible effects, which publicly and manifestly prove that the service of sin is a hard drudgery, and whatever pleasure it may seem to promise, its pay is misery and pain. “Who hath woe, contentions, and wounds, without cause?” (Proverbs 23:29). The drunkard: lewdness and drunkenness, are highways, if I may so speak, leading to infamy,

disease, penury, and death. Such persons do not live out half the days which their constitutions might have afforded, if they had not sold themselves to do wickedly. Again, look into their houses. Where the Lord does not dwell, peace will not inhabit. How frequently may we observe, in their family connections, discord and enmity between man and wife, unkind parents, disobedient children, tyrannical masters, and treacherous servants? Thus they live, “hateful in themselves, and hating one another” (Titus 3:3). If they have what the world counts prosperity, their hard master, Satan, so works upon their evil dispositions, that they can derive no real comfort from it. Every day, almost every hour, puts some new bitterness into their cup. And in trouble they have no resource; having no access to God, no promise to support them, no relief from Him against their anxieties and fears, they either sink down in sullen comfortless despondency, or in a spirit of wild rebellion, “blaspheme Him because of their plagues” (Revelation 16:21). In society, they are dreaded and avoided by the sober and serious, and can only associate with such as themselves. There, indeed, they will pretend to be happy; they carouse, and make a noise, and assist each other to banish reflection; yet frequently the drink, or the devil, break their intimacies, and stir them up to quarrels, broils, and mischief. Such is a life of sin. “The Lord rules them with a rod of iron.” They renounce His fear, and He refuses them His blessing. Nothing more is necessary to render them miserable, than to leave them to themselves.

(2). “He rules them with a rod of iron,” by His power over conscience. They may boast and laugh, but we know the gall and bitterness of their state, for we, likewise, were in it, until the Lord delivered us. Let them say what they will, we are sure that there are seasons, when, like him whom they serve, “they believe and tremble” (James 2:19). They cannot always be in company, they cannot always be intoxicated; though this is the very reason why many intoxicate themselves so often, because they cannot bear their own thoughts when sober. They are then a burden and a terror to themselves. They feel the iron rod. How awful are the thoughts which sometimes awaken them, or keep them awake, in

the silent hours of the night! What terrors seize them in sickness, or when they are compelled to think of death! What a death warrant do they often receive in their souls, under the preaching of that Word of God, which fills His people with joy and peace! Many will not hear it. But why not? They will not, because they dare not. I am persuaded there are more than a few of the brave spirits of the present day, who would willingly change conditions with a dog; and be glad to part with their reason, if they could at the same time get rid of the horrors which haunt their consciences. Is there one such person here? Let me entreat you to stop and consider, before it is too late. There is yet forgiveness with God. Your case, though dangerous, is not desperate, if you do not make it so yourself. I would direct your thoughts to Jesus. Look to Him, and implore His mercy. His blood can cleanse from all sin. He is able to save to the uttermost.

It is possible some may affect to contradict the representation I have made, and be ready to say, "I find nothing of all this. I take a pleasure in my way. I have a healthy body, money at my command, and I can sleep soundly. I feel none of the qualms of conscience you speak of; and though the saints and good folks care as little for me as I do for them, yet I am very well and happy with such acquaintance as I like best. As to an hereafter, I do not think of it; but I am determined to live now."

In answer to sentiments of this kind, which I am afraid are too common, I observe,

(3). That the amazing hardness and blindness of heart to which some sinners are given up, is another, and the most terrible effect "of that iron rod," with which the Lord "rules His enemies." Pharaoh would say as positively as you, "Who is the Lord that I should obey Him?" (Exodus 9:16). But because being often rebuked, he perished in his obstinacy, the contest terminated in his destruction. If you are obstinate like him now, I believe you were not always so. You must have laboured hard, you must have resisted the light of truth, and have stifled many a conviction, before you could arrive to this pitch of obduracy [invincible hardness of heart]. You have fought against the Holy Spirit, and

woe unto you, if He be gone, gone for ever, and will strive with you no more. To be thus given up of God to a reprobate mind, is the heaviest judgment that a sinner can be visited with on this side of hell. I am at a loss what to say to a person thus disposed, and I hope there are none such present. But I would warn those, who, though they have sinned with a high hand, are not yet altogether past feeling, lest you fall into such a state of confirmed disobedience and unbelief. "Take heed lest you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" (Hebrews 3:13). If under the light of the Gospel you can go on in a course of wilful, wanton, deliberate wickedness, you are upon the very edge of the unpardonable sin, of that state from which it is impossible to renew you to repentance. If the Bible be, as you vainly wish it may prove, "a cunningly devised fable," you may trample upon it with impunity, and laugh on securely to the end of life. But if it be true, remember you have been this day warned of the consequences of despising it. If you will perish, I am clear of your blood.

2. I proceed to consider the final issue of this unequal contest, between the worms of this earth and their Maker. "He will dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." Such a vessel may be curiously wrought, and appear beautiful to the eye, but it is frail, easily broken, and when once broken to pieces it is irreparable. It is, therefore, a fit emblem of mortal man in his best estate. "We are fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14). The texture of the human frame is admirable. The natural capacities of the mind of man, the powers of his understanding, will, and affections, the rapidity of imagination, the comprehension of memory, especially in some instances, are so many proofs, that, considered as a creature of God, he is a noble creature. And though he is debased and degraded by sin, there are traces of his original excellence remaining, sufficient to denominate him, in the words of the poet, * "majestic though in ruins." But if you suppose him rich, powerful, wise, in the common sense of the words, he is brittle as "a potter's vessel," and while possessed of

every possible advantage, he is like the grass or the flower of the field, which in its most flourishing state, falls, in a moment, at the stroke of the scythe, and withers and dies. A fever, a fall, a tile, a grain of sand, or the air that finds its way through a crevice, may be an overmatch for the strongest man, and bring him down hastily to the grave. By a small change in the brain, or some part of the nervous system, he who prides himself in his intellectual abilities, may soon become a lunatic, or an idiot. Disease may quickly render the beauty loathsome, and the robust weak as infancy. There are earthen or china vessels, which might possibly endure for many ages, if carefully preserved from violence. But the seeds of decay and death are sown in our very frame. We are crushed before the moth, and moulder away untouched, under the weight of time. How surely and inevitably then must they whom the Lord strikes with His iron rod, be shattered with the blow!

* from CORNUBIA - by George Woodley (1819).

Communities and collective bodies of men, are, in His hand, no less frail than individuals. The first-born throughout Egypt, and the vast army of Sennacherib, perished in a night. The Romans were the iron rod in His hand, wherewith He dashed the Jewish nation to pieces. Their fragments are scattered far and wide to this day, and who can gather them up? The Roman Empire was likewise dashed to pieces in its turn; and such has been the end, successively, of many powers, and of many persons, who have presumed to oppose His designs. For a while they were permitted to rage, and plot, and strive; but at length they stumbled and fell, and their memory is perished.

But it is proper to bring the consideration nearer home. I have been informed that the music to which this passage is set, is so well adapted to the idea it expresses, as in a manner to startle those who hear it. They who live in sinful habits, regardless of the Gospel, would be startled, indeed, if they were duly sensible how directly the words apply to their own situation, and that the Psalmist describes the manner in which God will treat them if they continue impenitent. If we could see all that passes upon dying beds, we should often see the false peace and vain hopes of

sinner dashed to pieces when eternity is opening upon their view. We shall certainly see the solemnity of the great day: "For we must all appear," not only as spectators, but as parties nearly interested in the proceedings "before the judgment seat of Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:10) Behold, He cometh with clouds, and every eye shall see Him, and they also which pierced Him! (Revelation 1:7). He will "descend with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God" (1 Thessalonians 4:16), "and before Him shall be gathered all nations" (Matthew 25:32). Where, then, shall the sinner and the ungodly appear? What will then become of those who despise, and those who abuse the Gospel of the grace of God? The libertine, the infidel, the apostate, the hypocrite, the profane scoffer, and false professor, how will they stand, or whither will they flee, when the great Judge shall sit upon His awful Throne, and the books shall be opened, and every secret thing shall be disclosed? Alas! for them that "are full," and that laugh now, for then they shall pine and "mourn" (Luke 6:25). Then their cavils will be silenced, their guilt, with all its aggravations, be charged home upon them, and no plea, no advocate be found. Can their hearts endure, or their hands be strong, when He shall speak to them in His wrath, and say, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels?"

But let them who love His name rejoice. You have fled for refuge to the hope set before you. To you His appearance will be delightful, and His voice welcome. You shall not be ashamed. This awful God is yours. He will then own and accept you before assembled worlds, and will say, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you." Then "the days of your mourning shall be ended, and your sun shall go down no more" (Isaiah 60:20).

