

Sermons of John Newton

Based on Scripture Passages
Used in Handel's 'Messiah' Part 3

Booklet Nineteen

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45. Divine Support and Protection - Romans 8:31
46. Accusers Challenged - Romans 8:33
47. The Intercession of Christ - Romans 8:34

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45. Divine Support and Protection

“What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?” Romans 8:31.

The passions of joy or grief, of admiration or gratitude, are moderate when we are able to find words which fully describe their emotions. When they rise very high, language is too faint to express them; and the person is either lost in silence, or feels something which, after his most laboured efforts, is too big for utterance. We may often observe the Apostle Paul under this difficulty, when attempting to excite in others such sensations as filled his own heart, while contemplating the glories and blessings of the Gospel. Little verbal critics, who are not animated by his fervour, are incapable of entering into the spirit of his writings. They coldly examine them by the strictness of grammatical rules, and think themselves warranted to charge him with solecisms [ungrammatical usages] and improprieties of speech. For it must be allowed that he sometimes departs from the usual forms of expression; invents new words, or at least compounds words for his own use, and heaps one hyperbole [figure of speech] upon another. But there is a beautiful energy in his manner far superior to the frigid exactness of grammarians, though the taste of a mere grammarian is unable to admire or relish it. When he is stating the advantage of being with Christ as beyond anything that can be enjoyed in the present life, he is not content with saying, as his expression is rendered in our version, “It is far better” (Philippians 1:23). In the Greek, another word of comparison is added, which, if our language would bear the literal translation, would be, “Far more better,” or, “Much more better.” And when he would

describe the low opinion he had of himself, great as his attainments were in our view, he thinks it not sufficient to style himself, “The least of all saints,” but, “less than the least” (Ephesians 3:8). Such phrases do not imply that he was ignorant of the rules of good writing, but they strongly intimate the fullness of his heart. In the course of the chapter before us, having taken a rapid survey of the work of grace, carried on by successive steps in the hearts of believers, till at length consummated in glory; in this verse, instead of studying for words answerable to his views, he seems to come to a full stop, as sensible that the strongest expressions he could use would be too faint. He makes an abrupt transition from describing, to admiring. He has said much, but not enough. And therefore sums up all with, “What shall we say to these things?” Surely they who can read what he could not write, with the utmost coolness and indifference, without rapture and astonishment, do not take his words in his sense. If the Apostle’s phraseology is now become obsolete, and sounds uncouth in the ears of too many who would be thought Christians, is there not too much reason to fear that they are Christians only in name?

Though this short lively question is omitted in the musical composition [of the Messiah Oratorio], I am not willing to leave it out. It stands well as a sequel to what we have lately considered. The sting of death is taken away. Death itself is swallowed up in victory. Sinners who were once burdened with guilt and exposed to condemnation, obtain a right to sing, “Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory, through our Lord Jesus Christ”—“What shall we say to these things?”

It stands well likewise, as introducing the following question. “If God be for us,” if His promises, His power, His wisdom, and His love, be all engaged on our behalf, “who can be against us?” What “shall we,” or can we, or need we, “say” more than this? What cause can we have for fear? or our enemies for triumph, if God be for us?

We may consider:

1. What is implied in the supposition?
2. The meaning of the inference.

1. The form of the question is hypothetical. If the assumption be right, that God is for us; the conclusion, that none can be effectually against us, is infallibly sure. Many serious persons will allow, that if God be indeed for them, all must, and will be well, in the end. But they hesitate at the “if” and are ready to ask, How shall I know that God is for me? I would offer you a few considerations towards the determining of this point, in the first place.

Sin has made an awful breach and separation between God and mankind. They are alienated in their minds from Him, and He is justly displeased with them. The intercourse and communion with God, which constitute the honour and happiness of the human nature, were no longer either afforded or desired, when man rebelled against his Maker; except to the few who understood and embraced His gracious purpose of reconciliation, the first intimation of which, was revealed in the promise of the seed of the woman, who should bruise the serpent’s head (Genesis 3:15). The clear and full discovery of this reconciliation is made known to us by the Gospel. “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19). God is already reconciled in this sense, that having provided and accepted a satisfaction to His law and justice, He can now, in a way worthy of Himself, receive and pardon the returning sinner. And He accompanies the word of His grace with the power of His Holy Spirit, to make sinners willing to be reconciled to Him. If we be for God, He is assuredly for us. If we seek Him, He has been with us beforehand; for, in the first instance, He is always “found of those who sought Him not” (Isaiah 65:1). If we love Him, it is because He first loved us. True believers walk with God. “But two cannot walk together,” with confidence and comfort, “unless they be agreed” (Amos 3:3). This agreement is chiefly with respect to those particulars, proposed by the Lord God in His Word, and to which the believing sinner cheerfully and thankfully accedes.

(1). In the ground of the agreement; this is MESSIAH, the Mediator between God and man. When He entered upon His office, a voice from heaven commended Him to sinners, “This is

my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). And they who are enlightened to behold the glory of God in His person and engagement, accept Him as the beloved Saviour, in whom and with whom they are well pleased. Without this acceptance of the Mediator, there can be no agreement. Jesus is the only door, the only way of a sinner’s access to the knowledge and favour of God. This is the precious and sure foundation which He has laid in Zion (1 Peter 2:6); and to presume to build our hope upon any other, is to build upon a quicksand. In this point, reason, in its present distempered state, would lead us, if followed, directly contrary to the simplicity of faith. Reason suggests, that if we have acted wrong, we must repent and amend, and what can we do more? But the law against which we have sinned makes no provision for repentance. Nor is such a repentance, as includes a change of heart (and nothing short of this deserves the name) in our own power. “Repentance unto life” (Acts 11:18), is the gift of God; and Jesus who is exalted “to be a Prince and a Saviour” (Acts 5:31), bestows it upon those who acknowledge Him, and implore it of Him. But God will only treat with us as those who are condemned already, who have nothing but sin, and deserve nothing but misery. When we feel this to be our proper state, we are referred to Jesus, in whom God is well pleased; and for whose sake sins are pardoned, and sinners accepted and justified, without condition and without exception. And then likewise, we begin to see the necessity, propriety and sufficiency of this appointment. Herein all who are taught of God are of one mind. However they may differ in some respects, they agree in cordially [sincerely] “receiving Christ Jesus the Lord” (Colossians 2:6), as He “who of God is made unto us wisdom, righteousness, and salvation.”

(2). They agree with God in the great design of the Gospel, which is to purify unto Himself a peculiar people who, being delivered from their fears and their enemies, shall serve Him with an unreserved and persevering obedience (Luke 1:74, 75). A deliverance from the power of sin and Satan, a devotedness to God, and a conformity to the mind and pattern of His dear Son,

are included by every true believer in the idea of salvation. He knows that he can be happy in no other way. This is a turning point. There are convictions of sin excited by a dread of punishment which, though distressing to the conscience, leave the heart and affections unchanged. They who are thus impressed, if no farther, would be satisfied with an assurance of pardon. But “the grace of God that bringeth salvation” (Titus 2:11, 12) teaches us to “renounce,” to abhor “all ungodliness in the present world;” to give ourselves unto Him “who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity;” and to “walk worthy of God, who calls us to His Kingdom and glory” (1 Thessalonians 2:12). “This is the will of God; even our sanctification.” And this is the desire of His people, that they may be sanctified wholly; that their whole persons, spirit, soul and body may be preserved blameless; that they may be filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ; that they may walk as the sons of God, without rebuke, and shine as lights in the world (Philippians 2:15). Though their attainments are imperfect, in their judgment and desires they are fully agreed with God, as to their aim and design.

(3). They are agreed with Him likewise as to the ultimate great end, the final cause of the redemption, which is, “the praise of the glory of His grace” (Ephesians 1:6). That the loftiness, high looks, and proud pretences of men may be abased, and the Lord alone may be exalted; “and that he who glorieth may glory only in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:31). Salvation is of the Lord, in every sense; the plan, the price, the power, the application, the consummation. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the author and the object of it. The praise therefore is wholly due to Him, and He claims it. To this claim His people fully consent. It is the desire of their souls that His name, which alone is excellent, may alone be extolled. And with one heart and voice they say, “Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto Thee be all the glory and all the praise!” (Psalm 115:1).

If we truly understand and approve these things, then we are certainly engaged for God, and of course, His is for us. For He alone could either enable us to see them in their true light, or

incline our hearts to embrace them. Who then can be against us?

2. We are not to understand the question, “Who can be against us?” as designed to encourage us to expect that they who have the Lord on their side will meet with no opposition; but that all opposition against them will be in vain.

(1). They whom God is for, will, on that very account, have many opposers.

First, the men of the world. Our Lord expressly teaches us to expect this: “If ye were of the world, the world would love its own. But because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you” (John 15:19). And His Apostle: “Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you” (1 John 3:14). Till we declare for Him the world will bear with us, but no longer: as the Gibeonites were in a state of honour and friendship with the neighbouring cities till they submitted to Joshua (Joshua 10:1-4); but when they obtained peace from him, they were immediately involved in war with their former friends. While Saul persecuted the Church the world smiled upon him, and he seemed to be, as we say, in the way of preferment. But when he yielded himself to the service of Christ, and his defection from the common cause became generally known, bonds and afflictions awaited him in every place; and they who before had employed and caressed him, sought his life. I do not mean to sound a trumpet of defiance. I believe that young converts, by their warm, but injudicious zeal, often more than is necessary, provoke the spirit of the world, and thereby increase their own difficulties. The Gospel, when rightly understood, inspires a spirit of benevolence and directs to a conduct which is suited to conciliate goodwill and esteem. And when the Apostle exhorts us, “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12:18), he gives us hope that much may be done to soften prejudices, to put to silence the ignorance of foolish men, and to make them at least ashamed, by a patient perseverance in well-doing. A consistent Christian, whose integrity, humility and philanthropy mark his character and adorn

his profession, will, in time, command respect; but his attachment to unfashionable truths, and his separation from the maxims and pursuits of the many, will render him, in their eyes, singular and precise, weak and enthusiastic. If they say, “He is a good sort of man, but has some strange peculiarities,” it is the most favourable judgment he can hope for; and from some persons, and at some times, he will meet with tokens of a settled dislike. For though a religious character may be formed, which even the world will approve, yet “all who will live godly in Christ Jesus, must suffer persecution” (2 Timothy 3:12). They walk in the midst of observers who watch for their halting, who lay snares for their feet, and will endeavour to bribe or intimidate them to forsake the path of duty. It is difficult to stem the torrent, or to avoid the infection of the world; and to live superior to the fear of man, as becomes us if we know whose we are, and whom we serve. But though difficult, it is practicable and attainable, and actually attained by believers; “for this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4).

Secondly, the powers of darkness. Ordinarily, Satan will not trouble while he bears rule. He is indeed an enemy to his own servants, and seeks their destruction, both soul and body, by pushing them on in sin, which, if persisted in, will prove their ruin; but while they make no resistance, he gives them no disturbance. It is otherwise with those whom the Lord has freed from his bondage. He will pursue them, like a lion seeking his prey (1 Peter 5:8), and lie in wait for them like a serpent in the path. This is one cause of the world’s hatred; for the Scripture styles him “the god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4), and he sets all that he can influence, tongues, and pens, and swords, against those who are on the Lord’s side. And they also fight against him. The former, without the latter, is not conclusive. A mere outward profession of religion may excite opposition, and mere pretenders may take pleasure in it for a time, if it does not come too close. It may feed their vanity, and give them a sort of consequence, by having sufferings to talk of. But I would entreat my hearers to seriously examine, Is your heart really set against sin, which is the

strength of Satan's kingdom? Are you against his will and interest in the world? Have you renounced his service? If so, fear not. God is for you, and none can harm you. For,

(2). No opposition can prevail against us, if God be for us. It is impossible to deny, or even to doubt this truth, upon the principles of reason. For who, or what, can injure those who are under the protection of Omnipotence? And yet it is not always easy to maintain the persuasion of it in the mind, and to abide in the exercise of faith, when, to an eye of sense, all things seem against us. But though we believe not, he continues faithful, and will not forsake those whom He once enables to put their trust in Him. Job was a faithful and approved servant of God, yet, for a season, his trials were great, and his confidence was sometimes shaken. But he was supported, and at length delivered. There are many instances recorded in Scripture to confirm our faith, and to teach us that God manifests Himself to be for His people, and, in different ways, renders them superior to all their difficulties and enemies.

At one time, He prevents the threatened danger. They only see it, or expect it, for He is better to them than their apprehensions and fears. Thus, when Sennacherib was furious against Jerusalem, and supposed he could easily prevail, he was not suffered [allowed] to come near it (Isaiah 37:33). When he thought to destroy it, he felt a hook and bridle which he could not resist, and was compelled to retire disappointed and ashamed.

At another time the enemies go a step farther. His people are brought into trouble, but God is with them, and they escape unhurt. So Daniel: though he was cast into the den of lions, he received no more harm from them than if he had been among a flock of sheep (Daniel 6:23). The Lord permitted three of His servants to be thrown into a furnace of fire, but He restrained the violence of the flames, so that not even a hair of their heads was singed (Daniel 3:27).

The most that opposers can do is to kill the body (Luke 12:4). If God permits His people to be thus treated, still they are not forsaken. Their death is precious in His sight (Psalm 116:15).

They who die in the Lord, are blessed. They are highly honoured, who are called and enabled to die for Him. If He is pleased to comfort them with His presence, and then to take them home to Himself, they can desire no more. Stephen, though apparently given up to the power of his adversaries, and cruelly stoned to death, was no less happy than those who die in composure upon their beds, with their friends around them. Nor was he less composed. For the heavens were opened to him, and he saw his Saviour in glory, approving his fidelity, and ready to receive his spirit (Acts 7:56-60).

In brief, whatever men or devils may attempt against us, there are three things, which, if we are true believers, they cannot do. They may be helpful to wean us from the world; they may add earnestness to our prayers; they may press us to greater watchfulness and dependence; they may afford fair occasions of evidencing our sincerity, the goodness of our cause, and the power of that God who is for us.—Such are the benefits, that the Lord teaches His people to derive from their sufferings, for He will not let them suffer, or be oppressed in vain. But no enemy can deprive us of the love with which God favours us, or the grace which He has given us, or the glory which He has prepared for us. “Now what shall we say to these things?”

Alas! there are too many that say, at least in their hearts (for their conduct betrays their secret thoughts), we care but little about them. If they were to speak out, they might adopt the language of the rebellious Jews to the prophet, “As for the word that thou hast spoken unto us in the name of the Lord, we will not hearken unto thee. But we will certainly do whatsoever thing goeth forth out of our own mouth” (Jeremiah 44:16, 17). And there are others who plainly say, Let us then “continue in sin, that grace may abound.” They do not so expressly reject the Gospel, as to take encouragement from it to go on in their wickedness. The case of the former is very dangerous, that of the latter is still worse. But grace, though long slighted, though often abused, is once more proclaimed in your hearing. The Lord forbid that you should perish with the sound of salvation in your ears!

At present, and while you persist in your impenitence and unbelief, I may reverse the words of my text. Oh! consider, I beseech you, before it be too late: “If God be against you, who can be for you?” Will your companions comfort you in a dying hour? Will your riches profit you in the day of wrath? Will the recollection of your sinful pleasures, give you confidence to stand before this great and glorious Lord God, when you shall be summoned to appear at His tribunal? May you be timely wise, and “flee for refuge to the hope set before you!”

46. Accusers Challenged

“Who shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect? It is God who justifies” Romans 8:33.

Though the collating of manuscripts and various readings has undoubtedly been of use in rectifying some mistakes which, through the inadvertency of transcribers, had crept into different copies of the New Testament, yet such supposed corrections of the text ought to be admitted with caution, and not unless supported by strong reasons and authorities. The whole Scripture is given by inspiration of God: and they who thankfully receive it as His Book, will not trifle with it by substituting bold conjectural alterations, which, though they may deem them to be amendments, may possibly disguise or alter the genuine sense of the passage. Some fancied emendations [corrections] might be pointed out, suggested by very learned men, which do not seem to afford so strong a proof of the sound judgment of the proposers, as of their vanity and rashness. Let the learned men be as ingenious as they please in correcting and amending the text of * Horace or * Virgil, for it is of little importance to us whether their criticisms be well founded or not; but let them treat the pages of divine revelation with reverence.

* Horace - Roman poet (65-8 BC); * Virgil - Roman poet (70-19BC).

But the pointing [punctuation] of the New Testament, though it has a considerable influence upon the sense, is of inferior

authority. It is a human invention; very helpful, and for the most part, I suppose, well executed. But in some places it may admit of [be in need of] real amendment. The most ancient manuscripts are without points [punctuation marks], and some of them are even without a distinction of the words. With the pointing [punctuation], therefore, we may take more liberty than with the text; though even this liberty should be used soberly. A change in the pointing [punctuation] of this verse, and the following, will not alter the received sense; but, as some critics judge, will make it more striking and emphatical. If two clauses should be read with an interrogation, instead of a period, the Apostle's triumphant challenge may be expressed in the following brief paraphrase:

“Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?” Shall God Himself? So far from it, it is He who justifies. “Who is he that condemneth?” Shall Christ? Nay, He loves them and accepts them. Shall He who died for them, yea rather who is risen again, “who is even at the right hand of God,” on their behalf, “who also maketh intercession for them?” There is not the least ground to fear, that He will condemn them, who died to deliver them from condemnation. Nor can any charge of their enemies prevail to the condemnation of those, whom God is pleased to justify, and for whom Christ died, and now intercedes before the throne.

The death, the resurrection, and ascension of MESSIAH, we have already considered. I shall speak only to two points, from this verse.

1. The title here given to believers, “God's elect.”

2. Their great privilege, they are justified. “It is God who justifieth” them.

1. The persons who will be finally justified by God, are here styled, “His elect.” Very near and strong is the connection between peace and truth. Yet a mistaken zeal for the truth has produced many controversies, which have hurt the peace of the people of God among themselves; and at the time, have exposed them to the scorn and derision of the world. On the other hand, a pretended, or improper regard for peace, has often been prejudicial

to the truth. But that peace which is procured at the expense of truth, is too dearly purchased. Every branch of doctrine, belonging to the faith once delivered to the saints, is not equally plain to every believer. Some of these doctrines, the Apostle compares to milk, the proper and necessary food for babes (Hebrews 5:13, 14); others, to strong meat, adapted to a more advanced state in the spiritual life, when experience is more enlarged and the judgment more established. The Lord, the great Teacher, leads His children on gradually, from the plainer to the more difficult truths, as they are able to bear them. But human teachers are often too hasty, they do not attend sufficiently to the weakness of young converts; but expect them to learn and receive everything at once; they are not even content with offering strong meat prematurely to babes, but force upon them the bones of subtleties, distinctions, and disputations. But though a judicious minister will endeavour to accommodate himself to the state of his hearers, no Gospel truth is to be tamely and voluntarily suppressed, from a fear of displeasing men. In fact, however, the controversies which have obtained among real Christians, have not so much affected the truth as it lies in the Scripture, as the different explanations which fallible men of warm passions, and too full of their own sense, have given of it. They who professedly hold and avow the doctrine of an election of grace, are now called Calvinists; and the name is used, by some persons, as a term of reproach. They would insinuate that Calvin invented the doctrine; or at least, that he borrowed it from * Austin, who, according to them, was the first of the Fathers that held it. It is enough for me that I find this doctrine in the New Testament. But many things advanced upon the subject by later writers, I confess I do not find there. If any persons advance harsh assertions, not warranted by the Word of God, I am not bound to defend them. But as the doctrine itself is plainly taught, both by our Lord and His apostles, and is of great importance, when rightly understood, to promote the humiliation, gratitude, and comfort of believers, I think it my duty to state it as plainly as I can. I shall offer my view of it, in a series of propositions, so evidently founded (as I conceive) on acknowledged principles of

Scripture, that they cannot be easily controverted [disputed] by any persons who have a real reverence for the Word of God, and any due acquaintance with their own hearts.

* Austin (St. Augustine) - Roman philosopher and theologian (354- 430).

(1). All mankind are sinners (Romans 3:23), by nature and practice. Their lives are stained with transgressions, their hearts are depraved, their minds blinded and alienated from God. So that they are not sensible either of their guilt, or their misery; nor so much as desirous of returning to God, till He prevents [intercepts] them with His mercy, and begins to draw their hearts towards Himself. Were I to prove this at large, I might transcribe one half of the Bible. Nay, it is fully proved by experience and observation. The heathens felt and confessed it. My present subject does not require me to account for it, or to reason upon it. That it is so, I appeal to fact.

(2). The inestimable gift of a Saviour to atone for sin, and to mediate between God and man (John 3:16); that there might be a way opened for the communication of mercy to sinners, without prejudice to the honour of the perfections and government of God—this gift was the effect of His own rich grace and love (Romans 5:6, 8), no less unthought of, and undesired, than undeserved, by fallen man.

(3). Wherever this love of God to man is made known by the Gospel, there is encouragement, and a command given to “all men every where to repent” (Acts 17:30, 31). The manifestation of the eternal Word in the human nature, and His death upon the cross, are spoken of as the highest display of the wisdom and goodness of God. Designed to give us, in one and the same transaction, the most affecting sense of the evil of sin, and the strongest assurance imaginable, that there is forgiveness with God (Romans 3:24, 25).

(4). Men, while blinded by pride and prejudice, enslaved to sinful passions and under the influence of this present evil world, neither can nor will receive the truth in the love of it (2 Corinthians 4:4; John 6:44 and verse 40). They are prepossessed, and pre-engaged. This, at least, is evidently the case with many

people in this favoured nation, who, when the Gospel is proposed to them in the most unexceptional manner, not only disregard it, but treat it with a pointed contempt and indignation (Luke 4:28, 29; Acts 17:18). Such was its reception at the beginning, and we are not to wonder, therefore, that it is so at this day.

(5). As all mankind spring from one stock, there are not two different sorts of men by nature; consequently they who receive the Gospel are no better in themselves than they are who reject it. (Ephesians 2:3). The Apostle, writing to the believers at Corinth, having enumerated a catalogue in which he comprises some of the most flagitious [shamefully wicked] and infamous characters (1 Corinthians 6:9-11), and allowed to be so by the common consent of mankind; adds, "Such were some of you." Surely it cannot be said, that they who had degraded themselves below the brutes, by their abominable practices, were better disposed, than others, to receive that Gospel, which is not more distinguished by the sublimity [high spiritual and moral worth] of its doctrine, than by the purity and holiness of conversation which it enjoins!

(6). It seems, therefore, at least highly probable, that all men universally, if left to themselves, would act as the majority do to whom the Word of salvation is sent; that is, they would reject and despise it. And it is undeniable that some, who in the day of God's power, have cordially [sincerely] received the Gospel, did for a season oppose it with no less pertinacity [obstinacy], than any of those who have continued to hate and resist it to the end of life. Saul of Tarsus was an eminent instance (Acts 9:1). He did not merely slight the doctrine of a crucified Saviour; but, according to his mistaken views, thought himself bound in conscience to suppress those who embraced it. He breathed out threatening and slaughter and, as he expresses it himself, "was exceedingly mad against them" (Acts 26:11), and made havoc of them. His mind was filled with this bitter and insatiable rage, at the moment when the Lord Jesus appeared to him in his way to Damascus. Is it possible that a man thus disposed, should suddenly become a preacher of the faith with he had long laboured to destroy, if his heart and views had not been changed by a supernatural agency?

Or that the like prejudices in other persons, can be removed in any other manner?

(7). If all men had heard the Gospel in vain, “then Christ would have died in vain.” But this is prevented by the covenanted office and influence of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8), who accompanies the Word with His energy, and makes it the power of God to the salvation of those who believe. He prepares the minds of sinners, and, as in the case of Lydia (Acts 16:14), opens their hearts to understand and receive the truth, in the love of it.

(8). But who will presume to say, that when God was pleased to make a proposal of mercy to a race of rebels, He was likewise bound to overcome the obstinacy of men, in every case, and to compel them to accept it by an act of His invincible power? If He does thus interpose in favour of some, it is an act of free mercy, to which they have no claim. For if we had a claim, the benefit would be an act of justice, rather than mercy. May not the great Sovereign of the world “do what He will with His own?” (Matthew 20:15). And nothing is more peculiarly and eminently His own than His mercy. Yes, we are assured, that “He will have mercy on whom He will have mercy” (Romans 9:18); and whom He will, He may justly leave to be hardened, in their impenitence and unbelief. We have all deserved to be so left; but He, as the potter over the clay, has power and right to make a difference, as it seems good in His sight. And “who will say unto Him, What doest Thou?” (Job 9:12).

(9). When sinners are effectually called by the Gospel, then they are visibly chosen out of the world (John 15:19), in the spirit and tempers of which they before lived, disobedient and deceived, even as others. “Old things pass away, and all things become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Their hopes and fears, their companions, their pursuits and aims, are all changed. The change in these respects is so evident that they are soon noticed and marked, pitied or derided, by those from whom they are now separated. And I think they who really experience this change, will willingly ascribe it to the grace of God.

(10). But if they are thus chosen in time, it follows of course,

that they were chosen from everlasting. Both these expressions, when applied to this subject, amount to the same thing; and the seeming difference between them is chiefly owing to our weakness and ignorance. To the infinite and eternal God, our little distinctions of past, present, and future, are nothing. We think unworthily of the unchangeable Jehovah, and liken Him too much to ourselves, if we suppose that He can form a new purpose. If it be His pleasure to convert a sinner today, He had the same gracious design in favour of that sinner yesterday, at the day of his birth, a thousand years before he was born, and a thousand ages (to speak according to our poor conception) before the world began. For that mode of duration which we call time, has no respect to “Him who inhabits eternity” (Isaiah 57:15).

With regard to those who reject the declaration of the mercy of God; who, though called and invited by the Gospel, and often touched by the power of His Holy Spirit, will not come to the Saviour for life, but persist in their determination to go on in their sins—their ruin is not only unavoidable, but just in the highest degree. And though, like the wicked servant in the parable (Matthew 25:24), they cavil against the Lord, their mouths will be stopped (Romans 3:19) when He shall at length appear, to plead with them, face to face. Then their cobweb-excuses will fail them, and the proper ground of their condemnation will be, that when He sent them light, they turned from it, “and chose darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19).

2. The great privilege of the elect, comprehensive of every blessing, is that they are justified; finally and authoritatively justified, from all that can possibly be laid to their charge, for “it is God” Himself “who justifieth” them.

The justification of a sinner before God, by faith in the obedience and atonement of Christ, is considered by many persons, in these days of refinement, in no better light than as a branch of a scholastic theology, which is now exploded as uncouth and obsolete. At the Reformation, it was the turning point between the Protestants and Papists. Luther deemed it the

criterion of a flourishing, or a falling Church; that is, he judged that the Church would always be in a thriving or a declining state, in proportion as the importance of this doctrine was attended to. How important it appeared to our English Reformers, many of whom sealed their testimony to it with their blood, may be known by the writings of * Cranmer, * Latimer, * Philpot, and others; and by the articles of the Church of England, which are still of so much authority, by law, that no person can be admitted into holy orders amongst us, till he has declared and subscribed his assent to them. But I hope never to preach a doctrine to my hearers, which needs the names and authority of men, however respectable, for its support. “Search the Scriptures” (John 5:39); and judge by them of the importance of this doctrine. Judge of it by the text now before us. The Apostle speaks of it, as sufficient to silence every charge, to free from all condemnation, and inseparably connected with eternal life. For those “whom God justifies He will also glorify” (Romans 8:30). Though volumes have been written upon the subject, I think it may be explained in few words. Everyone must give an account of himself to God; and the judgment will proceed according to the tenor of His holy Word. By the law, no flesh can be justified, for all have sinned (Romans 3:19, 20). But they who believe the Gospel “will be justified from all things” (Acts 13:39), for which the law would otherwise condemn them. And, as they, who “believe not, are condemned already” (John 3:18); so believers are already “justified by faith, and have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1), in the present life. They plead guilty to the charge of the law. But they can likewise plead, that they renounce all hope and righteousness in themselves, and upon the warrant of the word of promise, put their whole trust in Jesus, as “the end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believeth” (Romans 10:4). And this plea is accepted. “To him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness” (Romans 4:4, 5), and his sins are no more remembered against him (Hebrews 8:12).

* Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556), Leader of the English

Reformation and Archbishop of Canterbury;

* Hugh Latimer (1487-1555), Bishop of Worcester, and Chaplain to King Edward VI;

* John Philpot (1516-1555), Archdeacon of Winchester.

All three of these godly men were martyred - - - burned at the stake.

This justification, in its own nature, is authoritative, complete, and final. It is an act of God's mercy, which, because founded upon the mediation of Jesus, may, with no less truth, be styled an act of His justice, whereby the believing sinner is delivered from the curse of the law, from the guilt and power of sin, and is "translated into the Kingdom of His dear Son" (Colossians 1:13). It includes the pardon of all sin, and admission to the state of a child of God.—It is a "passing from death unto life" (John 5:24). By faith of the operation of God, the sinner once afar off, is brought nigh, is accepted in the Beloved and becomes one with Him, as the branch is united to the vine, and the members with the Head (John 15:5). The sanctification of a believer is imperfect and gradual, but his justification, in this sense, from the moment when he begins to live a life of faith in the Son of God, is perfect and incapable of increase. The principle of life in a newborn infant, and the privilege dependent upon his birth (if he be the heir of a great family), are the same from the first hour, as at any future time. He is stronger as he grows up to the stature of a man, but is not more alive; he grows up likewise more into the knowledge and enjoyment of his privileges, but his right to them admits of no augmentation; for he derives it not from his years, or his stature, or his powers, but from the relation in which he stands, as a child to his father. Thus it is with those who are born from above. They are, immediately, the children and heirs of God, though for a time, like minors, while under age, they may seem to "differ but little from servants" (Galatians 4:1, 2), and it does not yet appear what they shall be.

But though justification, in the sight of God, be connected with the reality of faith, the comfortable perception of it in our own consciences is proportional to the degree of faith. In young

converts, therefore, it is usually weak. They are well satisfied that Jesus is the only Saviour, and they leave no doubt of His ability and sufficiency in that character, in favour of those who put their trust in Him. But they are suspicious and jealous of themselves; they are apprehensive of something singular in their own case, which may justly exclude them from His mercy; or they fear that they do not believe aright. But the weakest believer is a child of God; and true faith, though at first like a grain of mustard-seed, is interested in [is beneficiary of] all the promises of the Gospel. If it be true, it will grow (Mark 4:26), it will attain to a more simple dependence upon its great object, and will work its way through a thousand doubts and fears (which, for a season, are not without their use) till at length, the weakest Christian becomes strong in faith, “strong in the Lord,” and is enabled to say, “I know whom I have believed!” (2 Timothy 1:12). Who shall lay anything to my charge? Who shall condemn? It is God who justifies. It is Christ who died for me and rose again.

But especially at the great day, the Lord the Judge shall ratify their justification publicly before assembled worlds. Then “every tongue that rises in judgment against them” (Isaiah 54:17) shall be put to silence. Then Satan will be utterly confounded, and many who despised them on earth, will be astonished and say—“These are they whose lives we accounted madness, and their end to be without honour! How are they numbered among the children of God!” (Wisdom 5:4, 5).

The right knowledge of this doctrine, is a source of abiding joy; it likewise animates love, zeal, gratitude, and all the noblest powers of the soul, and produces a habit of cheerful and successful obedience to the whole will of God. But it may be, and too often is, misunderstood, and abused. If you receive it by divine teaching, it will fill you “with those fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God” (Philippians 1:11). But if you learn it only from men and books, if you are content with the notion of it in your head, instead of the powerful experience of it in your heart, it will have a contrary effect. Such a lifeless form, even of the truth itself will probably make you heady

and high-minded, censorious of others, trifling in your spirit, and unsettled in your conduct. Oh! be afraid of resembling the foolish virgins (Matthew 25:1-12), of having the lamp of your profession expire in darkness, for want of the oil of grace. Lest when the Bridegroom comes, you should find the door shut against you.

47. The Intercession of Christ

“Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us!” Romans 8:34.

The Redemption of the soul is precious. “Fools make a mock of sin” (Proverbs 14:9). But they will not think lightly of it, who duly consider the majesty, authority, and goodness of Him, against whom it is committed; and who are taught, by what God actually has done, what sin rendered necessary to be done, before a sinner could have a well-grounded hope of forgiveness. For wisdom does nothing in vain. The death of the Son of God would have been in vain (Galatians 2:21) if the great design in favour of sinful men could have been effected by inferior means. But as He, in the office of Mediator, was the hope of mankind from the beginning; so the great work He has accomplished and the characters He sustains, when made known to the conscience, are, in fact, sufficient to relieve in every case, to answer every charge, and to satisfy the believer in Jesus, that there is now no condemnation to fear. There are many (as we have observed) ready to accuse, but it is in vain; the charge may be true, but it is overruled. Who shall dare to condemn, if things be as the Apostle states them in this passage? Whoever would impeach the hope of a true believer, must prove (if he can) that Christ did not die; or that He did not rise from the dead; or that He was not admitted into the presence of God on our behalf; or that He is unmindful of His promise, to make intercession for all who come unto God by Him. For if these points are indubitable and sure, it is impossible that the soul, which has trusted in Jesus, and put its cause into His hands, can miscarry.

The word the Apostle uses here, and in Hebrews 7:25—“seeing He ever lives to make intercession,” occurs likewise in Acts 25:24, where Festus speaks of the process managed by the Jews against Paul; and also Romans 11:24, of Elijah’s making intercession to God against Israel. From these passages compared together, we may observe, that the word is to be taken in a large sense. He pleads our cause, He manages our concerns, He answers our enemies. Who then shall condemn those for whom the Lord Jesus thus employs His power and His love? He is our “Advocate” (1 John 2:1). He takes upon Him our whole concern. He pleads as a Priest, and manages as a King, for those who come unto God by Him.

1. He pleads as a Priest. His office of intercession has a plain reference to His great instituted type [prophetic symbol], the High Priest under the Levitical dispensation [order]; who, according to the appointment of God, entered within the veil, to present the blood of the sacrifice before the mercy seat (Leviticus 16:2). We have a clear and infallible explanation of the design of this institution. “Now when these things were thus ordained, the priests went always into the first tabernacle, accomplishing the service of God. But into the second went the high priest alone once every year, not without blood, which he offered for himself, and for the errors of the people: The Holy Ghost this signifying, that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while as the first tabernacle was yet standing: Which was a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience; Which stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, and carnal ordinances, imposed on them until the time of reformation. But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us.” (Hebrews 9:6-12). Thus Jesus “is

passed into the heavens,” entered into the holy of holies with His own blood. His presence there, in our nature, with the marks of His sufferings for us as the Lamb that has been slain, is an unceasing, virtual intercession on our behalf. I meddle not with the curious questions on this subject, as to the manner in which His intercession is carried on: it is sufficient to know that He is there, and for us, as our representative. This consideration is of continual use to animate and encourage sinners in their approach to God. There are three cases particularly, in which the heart that knows its own bitterness must sink, were it not for the relieving thought that there is an “Advocate with the Father,” a “High Priest,” who by His intercession is “able to save to the uttermost.”

(1). When the mind is burdened with guilt. Great is the distress of an awakened conscience. The sinner now is sensible of wants, which God alone can supply, and of miseries, from which he cannot be extricated, but by an Almighty arm. But when he thinks of the majesty and holiness of God, he is troubled, and adopts the language of the Prophet, “Woe is me, I am undone” (Isaiah 6:5). He dares not draw near to God, nor does he dare to keep at a distance from Him any longer. But when such a one is enabled to look to Jesus as the Intercessor, what light and comfort does he receive! For the Gospel speaks inviting language. Let not the weary and heavy laden sinner fear to approach. Your peace is already made in the Court above, and your Advocate is waiting to introduce you. Lift up your heart to Him, and think you hear Him, in effect, saying, “Father, there is another sinner, who has heard of my name, and desires to trust in me. Father, I will that he also may be delivered from going down into the pit, and interested in the ransom which I have provided.”

(2). When we are deeply conscious of our defects in duty. If we compare our best performances, with the demands of the law, the majesty of God, and the unspeakable obligations we are under; if we consider our innumerable sins of omission, and that the little we can do is polluted and defiled by the mixture of evil thoughts, and the working of selfish principles, aims, and motives, which, though we disapprove we are unable to suppress, we have great

reason to confess, “To us belong shame and confusion of face” (Daniel 9:7). But we are relieved by the thought that Jesus, the High Priest, bears the iniquity of our holy things, perfumes our prayers with the incense of His mediation, and washes our tears in His own blood. This inspires a confidence, that though we are unworthy of the least of His mercies, we may humbly hope for a share in the greatest blessings He bestows, because we are heard and accepted not on the account of our own prayers and services, but in the beloved Son of God, who makes intercession for us.

Thus the wisdom and love of God have provided a wonderful expedient which, so far as it is rightly understood and cordially [sincerely] embraced, while it lays the sinner low as the dust in point of humiliation and self-abasement, fills him, at the same time, with a hope full of glory, which, with respect to its foundation, cannot be shaken; and, with respect to its object, can be satisfied with nothing less than all the fullness of God. There are favoured seasons, in which the believer, having a lively impression of the authority and love of the Intercessor, can address the great Jehovah as his Father with no less confidence than if he was holy and spotless as the angels before the throne, at the very moment that he has abundant cause to say, “Behold I am vile! I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes!” (Job 40:4; 42:6).

(3). This powerful and prevalent intercession abundantly compensates for the poverty and narrowness of our prayers. Experience confirms what the Scripture declares of our insufficiency to order our own cause before the Lord, to specify our various wants, and to fill our mouths with such arguments as may engage the attention, and enliven the affections of our hearts. “We know not how to pray as we ought” (Romans 8:26). And though the Holy Spirit teaches believers to form petitions, which in the main are agreeable to the will of God, yet we often mistake and ask amiss; we often forget what we ought to ask, and we are too often cold, negligent, weary, distracted and formal in prayer. How prone are we to enter by prayer into the Lord’s presence, as the thoughtless “horse rushes into the battle!” (Jeremiah 8:6) to

speak to God, as if we were only speaking into the air, and to have our thoughts dissipated and wandering to the ends of the earth, while His holy name is upon our polluted lips! It is well for us, that God is both able and gracious to do more than we can ask or think; but that He actually does so, for such unworthy creatures, is owing to our Intercessor. He knows all our wants, and pleads and provides accordingly. He is not negligent, though we too frequently are. He prayed for Peter's safety (Luke 22:31, 32) before Peter himself was aware of his danger. Have we not sometimes been, as it were, surprised and shamed by the Lord's goodness, when He has condescended to bestow special and needful mercies upon us, before we thought of asking for them? These are affecting proofs of our Intercessor's attention and care, and that He is always mindful of us. But:—

2. Jesus, the High Priest is upon a throne. He is a King, "King of saints, and King of nations." He is not only a righteous advocate, but He possesses all authority and power. And it belongs to His office as King, effectually to manage for those in whose behalf He intercedes. I have already observed, that the original word, includes this sense.

(1). He is the source and fountain of the supplies. All their springs are in Him. The fullness of wisdom, grace, and consolation, out of which they are invited to receive, resides in Him. And therefore He says, "If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it" (John 14:14). Not merely I will present your petitions, but I will fulfil them myself. For all things are committed into His hands, and it is He "with whom we have to do" (Hebrews 4:13). He therefore enjoins [urges] us, If we believe, or trust in God, to "believe also in Him" (John 14:1). His invitations, "If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink," (John 7:37) and "Whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely" (Revelation 22:17); equally express His sovereignty and His munificence [liberality]. On Him the eyes of all who know Him, wait from age to age, and are not disappointed. "He opens His hand, and satisfies them with

good” (Psalm 145:16). Nor is the store of His bounty diminished by all that He has distributed, for it is unsearchable and inexhaustible; like the light of the sun, which gladdens the eyes of millions at once, has done so from the beginning and will continue to do so to the end of time.

(2). He appoints and adjusts their various dispensations [happenings; experiences] with an unerring suitableness to their several states, capacities, and circumstances. If a skilful gardener had the command of the weather, he would not treat all his plants, nor the same plant at all times, exactly alike. Continual rain, or continual sunshine, would be equally unfavourable to their growth and fruitfulness. In His Kingdom of Providence, He so proportions the rain and the sunshine to each other, that the corn is usually brought forward, from the seed to the blade, the ear, and the full ripe ear. And I believe it would be always so, were it not for the prevalence of sin, which sometimes makes the heavens over our head brass, the earth under our feet iron (Deuteronomy 28:23), and turns a fruitful land into barrenness. So, in His Kingdom of grace He trains His people up by various exercises. He delights in their prosperity, and does not willingly grieve them. But in their present state, afflictions are necessary, and His blessing makes them salutary. But this is their great privilege, that their comforts and their crosses are equally from His hand, are equally tokens of His love, and alike directed to work together for their good. He appoints the bounds of their habitations, numbers the hairs of their heads, and is their guide and guard, their sun and shield, even unto death. Here they meet with many changes, but none that are unnoticed by Him, none that can separate them from His love, and they all concur, in leading them on to a state of unchangeable and endless joy (2 Corinthians 4:17).

(3). He is “the Captain of their salvation” (Hebrews 2:10). They are His soldiers, and fight under His eye; yet the battle is not theirs, but His. Israel, of old, were to muster their forces, to range themselves for the fight, to use every precaution and endeavour, as though success depended entirely upon themselves. Yet, they obtained not the victory by their own sword, but it was the Lord

who fought for them; and they had little more to do than to pursue the vanquished, and to divide the spoil. And thus it is in the warfare which true Christians maintain, “not against flesh and blood only, but against principalities and powers” (Ephesians 6:12); against the spirit of the world, and against Satan and his legions. They fight in His cause, but He upholds them and conquers for them. Their enemies are too many and too mighty for them to grapple with in their own strength. But He rebukes them, and pleads the cause of His people. His gracious interposition in their favour is beautifully set forth, together with its effects, in the vision which the Prophet saw, when he was sent to encourage the rulers and people of the Jews, against the difficulties they met with when rebuilding the temple. He “saw Joshua the high priest,” who, in that character, represented the collective body of the people, “standing before the Lord, clothed in filthy garments, and Satan standing at his right hand to resist him” (Zechariah 3:1-4). Such is our attire as sinners, all our righteousness are as filthy rags; and such are the attempts of our enemy, to deter us from approaching to Him who alone can relieve us, or to distress us when we appear before Him. But when Joshua could not speak for himself, the Lord spoke for him, claimed him for His own, as a brand plucked out of the fire, silenced his adversary, clothed him with change of raiment, and set a fair mitre upon his head. Thus David acknowledged the Lord’s goodness, in providing him a table in the midst of his enemies (Psalm 23:5); who saw, with envy, his privileges, but were not able to prevent his enjoyment of them. Many a time, the Lord thus comforts and feeds His people, while they are waiting on Him in secret, or attending His public ordinances: and were our eyes opened, like the eyes of Elisha’s servant, to behold what is very near, though unseen, we should feel the force of the Psalmist’s observation. The powers of darkness surround us, their malice against us is heightened by the favour of our good Shepherd towards us; they rage, but in vain; for though they could presently deprive us of peace, and fill us with anguish, they are under a restraint, and can do nothing without His permission. When He is pleased to give quietness,

“who then can make trouble?” (Job 34:29). He preserves and provides for His sheep, in the midst of wolves!

We may close this part of our subject, with two or three reflections which, though I may have offered you the substance of them before, are always seasonable and suitable, when we are speaking of the power and grace of MESSIAH.

First, How precious is this Saviour! How justly is He entitled to the chief place in the hearts of those who know Him! In the work of salvation, from the first step to the last, He is all in all. If He had not died and risen again, we must have died for ever. If He had not ascended into heaven, there to appear in the presence of God for us, we must have been thrust down into the lowest hell. If He did not plead for us, we could not, we durst not, offer a word in our own behalf. If He was not on our part, engaged to keep us night and day, our enemies would soon be too hard for us. May we, therefore, give Him the glory due to His name, and cleave to Him, and trust in Him, alone.

Secondly, How safe are the people, of whom he undertakes the care! While His eye is upon them, His ear open to their prayer, and His arm of power stretched out for their protection; while He remembers that word of promise, which, encouraged them to commit their souls to Him, it is impossible that any weapon or stratagem formed against them can prevail. There are many, it is true, who will rise up against them; but God is for them, and with them, “a very present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1). They are full of wants and fears, and, in themselves, liable to many charges; but since Jesus is their Head, their Security, their Intercessor, no needful good shall be withheld from them, no charge admitted against them, none shall condemn them, for it is God, Himself, who justifies the believer in Jesus.

Thirdly, If these things be so, how much are they to be pitied, who hear of them, without being affected or influenced by them! Will you always be content with hearing? “O taste and see that the Lord is good!” (Psalm 34:8). Should you at last be separated from those with whom you now join in public worship; should

you see them admitted into the Kingdom of God, and you yourselves be thrust out; your present advantages would then prove an aggravation of your guilt and misery. As yet, there is room. Strive to enter, while the gate of mercy remains open. Think of the solemnities of that great day. Many will then be condemned, though they who believe in the Son of God will be justified. Consider who will condemn them, “God Himself” (Psalm 50:6). From His inquisition there can be no retreat; from His sentence there can be no appeal. And consider what the condemnation will be! A final exclusion from His favour; a never-ceasing sense of His awful displeasure! A state of eternal horror and despair, without mitigation, without the smallest ray of hope. Can you deliberately give up all claim to happiness, and determine to rush “upon the thick * bosses of God’s buckler” (Job 15:26), to defy His power and to dare His threatenings, rather than forego the transitory and delusive pleasures of sin? [* bosses are the projecting parts of a shield]. And can you do this, with the Gospel sounding in your ears? May the Lord prevent it! However, observe, you are once more warned, once more invited. If now at last, after so many delays, so much perverseness, on your part, you will honestly and earnestly seek Him, He will be found of you. But if you persist in your obstinacy your condemnation will be inevitable and sure.

The nineteenth of twenty booklets.

