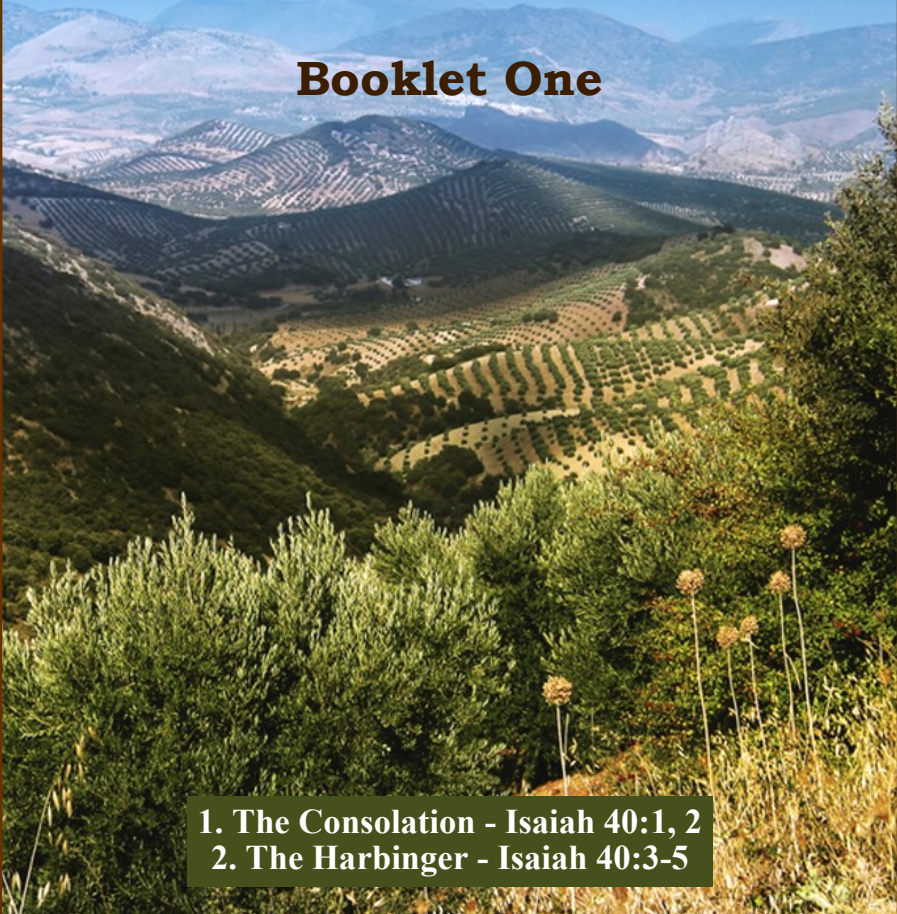


Sermons of John Newton

Based on Scripture Passages
Used in Handel's 'Messiah' Part 1

Booklet One

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1. The Consolation - Isaiah 40:1, 2
 2. The Harbinger - Isaiah 40:3-5

Sermons of John Newton

Booklet One

1. The Consolation and 2. The Harbinger [Forerunner]

1. The Consolation

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received at the LORD’s hand double for all her sins” Isaiah 40:1, 2.

The particulars of the great “mystery of godliness,” as enumerated by the Apostle Paul, constitute the grand and inexhaustible theme of the Gospel ministry, “God manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory” (1 Timothy 3:16). It is my wish and purpose to know nothing among you but this subject; to preach nothing to you but what has a real connection with the doctrine of Jesus Christ and Him crucified, and with the causes and the effects of His obedience unto death, even the death of the cross. But a regard to the satisfaction and the advantage of my stated hearers, has often made me desirous of adopting some plan, which might lead me to exhibit the principal qualities of the Saviour’s character and mediation in a regular series of discourses; so as to form, if not a picture, at least a slight sketch, of those features of His glory and of His grace, which endear Him to the hearts of His people. Such a plan has lately, and quite unexpectedly, occurred to me. Conversation in almost every company, for some time past, has much turned upon the commemoration of Handel; the grand musical entertainments, and particularly his Oratorio of the Messiah, which have been repeatedly performed on that occasion in Westminster Abbey. If it could be reasonably hoped that the performers and the company assembled to hear the music, or the greater part, or even a very considerable part of

them, were capable of entering into the spirit of the subject; I will readily allow that the Messiah, executed in so masterly a manner, by persons whose hearts, as well as their voices and instruments, were tuned to the Redeemer's praise; accompanied with the grateful emotions of an audience duly affected with a sense of their obligations to His love; might afford one of the highest and noblest gratifications, of which we are capable in the present life. But they who love the Redeemer, and therefore delight to join in His praise, if they did not find it convenient, or think it expedient, to hear the Messiah at Westminster, may comfort themselves with the thought, that, in a little time, they shall be still more gratified. Ere long death shall rend the veil which hides eternal things from their view, and will introduce them to the eternal song and universal chorus, which are even now performing before the Throne of God and of the Lamb. Till then, I apprehend, that true Christians, without the assistance of either vocal or instrumental music, may find greater pleasure in humble contemplation on the words of the Messiah, than they can derive from the utmost efforts of musical genius. This therefore is the plan I spoke of. I mean to lead your meditations to the language of the Oratorio, and to consider in their order (if the Lord on whom our breath depends shall be pleased to afford life, ability, and opportunity), the several sublime and interesting passages of Scripture, which are the basis of that admired composition.

If He shall condescend to smile upon the attempt, pleasure and profit will go hand in hand. There is no harmony to a heaven-born soul like that which is the result of the combination and coincidence of all the divine attributes and perfections, manifested in the work of Redemption; mercy and truth meeting together, inflexible righteousness corresponding with the peace of offenders, God glorious, and sinners saved. There is no melody upon earth to be compared with the voice of the blood of Jesus speaking peace to a guilty conscience, or with the voice of the Holy Spirit applying the promises to the heart, and

sweetly inspiring a temper of confidence and adoption. These are joys which the world can neither give nor take away, which never pall upon the mind by continuous repetition; the sense of them is always new; the recollection of them is always pleasant. Nor do they only satisfy, but sanctify the soul. They strengthen faith, animate hope, add fervency to love, and both dispose and enable the Christian to run in all the paths of holy obedience with an enlarged heart.

The Messiah of Handel consists of three parts. The first, contains prophecies of His advent and the happy consequences, together with the angel's message to the shepherds informing them of His birth, as related by St. Luke. The second part describes His passion, death, resurrection and ascension; His taking possession of His Kingdom of glory, the commencement of His Kingdom of grace upon the earth, and the certain disappointment and ruin of all who persist in opposition to His will. The third part expresses the blessed fruits and consummation of His undertaking in the deliverance of His people from sin, sorrow and death, and in making them finally victorious over all their enemies. The triumphant song of the redeemed, to the praise of the Lamb who bought them with His own blood, closes the whole. The arrangement or series of these passages, is so judiciously disposed, so well connected, and so fully comprehends all the principal truths of the Gospel, that I shall not attempt either to alter, or to enlarge it. The exordium, or introduction, which I have read to you from the prophecy of Isaiah is very happily chosen.

If, as some eminent commentators suppose, the prophet had any reference, in this passage, to the return of Israel from Babylon into their own land, his principal object was undoubtedly of much greater importance. Indeed their deliverance from captivity, and their state afterwards as a nation, do not appear to correspond with the magnificent images employed in the following verses. For though they rebuilt their city and temple, they met with many insults and much

opposition, and continued to be a tributary and dependent people. I shall therefore wave the consideration of this sense.

The eye of the Prophet's mind seems to be chiefly fixed upon one august [high-ranking; lofty] Personage, who was approaching to enlighten and bless a miserable world; and before he describes the circumstances of His appearance, he is directed to comfort the mourners in Zion, with assurance, that this great event would fully compensate them for all their sorrows. The state of Jerusalem, the representative name of the people of God, was very low in Isaiah's time. The people, who in the days of Solomon were attached to the service of God, honoured with signal tokens of His presence and favour, and raised to the highest pitch of temporal prosperity, were now degenerated, the gold was become dim, and the fine gold changed. Iniquity abounded, judgments were impending, yet insensibility and security prevailed, and the words of many were stout against the Lord. But there were a few who feared the Lord, whose eyes affected their hearts, and who mourned for the evils which they could not prevent. These and these only were, in strictness of speech, the people of the Lord, and to these the message of comfort is addressed. Speak to Jerusalem comfortably, speak to her heart (as the Hebrew word is) to her very case, and tell her there is a balm for her wounds, a cordial [tonic] for all her griefs in this one consideration, MESSIAH is at hand. In the prophetic style things future are described as present, and that which the mouth of the Lord has spoken as sure to take place, is considered already done. Thus the Prophet rapt [enraptured] into future times contemplates the manifestation of MESSIAH, the accomplishment of His great undertaking, and all the happy consequences of His obedience unto death for men, as though he stood upon the spot, and with John, the harbinger of our Lord, (whose appearance he immediately describes,) was pointing with his finger to the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.

This comfortable message consists of two parts. First, the

removal of evil; her warfare is accomplished, her iniquity is pardoned. Secondly, a promise of good more than equivalent to all her afflictions; she has received at the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

1. Two ideas are included in the original term translated warfare.

(1). A state of service connected with hardship, like that of a military life (Numbers 1:3)

(2). An appointed time, as it is rendered in Job 7:1 and 14: 14.

These ideas equally apply to the Mosaic dispensation. The spirit of that institution was comparatively a spirit of bondage, distance, and fear; and the state of the Church, while under the law, is resembled, by the Apostle, to that of a minor, who, though he be an heir, is under tutors and governors, and differs but little from a servant, until the appointed time of the Father (Galatians 4:1-4). The ceremonial law, with respect to its inefficacy, is styled weak, and with respect to the long train of its multiplied, expensive, difficult, and repeated appointments, a yoke and a burden. But it was only for a prescribed time. The Gospel was designed to supersede it, and to introduce a state of life, power, liberty, and confidence. The blackness and darkness, the fire and tempest, and other circumstances of terror attendant on the promulgation of the law at Mount Sinai, (Hebrews 12:18-22) which not only struck the people with dismay, but caused even Moses himself to say, "I exceedingly fear and quake," were expressive of its design; which was not to lead the people of Israel to expect peace and hope from their best obedience to that covenant; but rather to convince them of the necessity of a better covenant, established upon better promises, and direct their hopes to MESSIAH, who was prefigured by all their sacrifices; and who, in the fullness of time, was to make a complete atonement for sin by the sacrifice of Himself. Then their legal figurative constitution would cease, the shadows give

place to the substance, and the true worshippers of God would be instructed, enabled and encouraged to worship Him in spirit and in truth; no more as servants, but in the temper of adoption, as the children of God by faith in the Son of His love.

There is considerable analogy to this difference between the Law and the Gospel, as contradistinguished from each other, in the previous distress of a sinner, when he is made sensible of his guilt and danger as a transgressor of the law of God, and the subsequent peace which he obtains by believing the Gospel. The good seed of the word of grace, can only take root and flourish in a soil duly prepared. And this preparation of the heart (Proverbs 16:1) is wholly from the Lord—without which all that is read or heard concerning MESSIAH produces no permanent good effect.

The first good work of the Holy Spirit, upon the heart of fallen man, is to convince of sin (John 16:9). He gives some due impressions of the majesty and holiness of the God with whom we have to do, of our dependence upon Him, as our obligations to Him as our Creator, Lawgiver, and Benefactor; then we begin to form our estimate of duty, of sin and its desert, not from the prevalent maxims and judgments of mankind, around us, but from the unerring standard of Scripture. Thence new and painful apprehensions arise—the lofty looks of man are humbled, his haughtiness is brought low, his mouth stopped, or only opened to confess his guilt and vileness and to cry for mercy. He now feels himself under the law, it condemns him and he cannot reply, it commands him and he cannot obey. He has neither righteousness nor strength, and must sink into despair, were it not that he is now qualified to hearken to the Gospel with other ears, and read the Scriptures with other eyes (if I may so speak) than he once did. He now knows he is sick, and therefore knows his need of a physician. This state of anxiety, conflict and fear, which keeps comfort from his heart, and perhaps slumber from his eyes, is often of long continuance. There is no common standard whereby to determine either the degree or the duration.

Both differ in different persons; and as the body and the mind have a strong and reciprocal influence upon each other, it is probable the difference observable in such cases may in part depend upon constitutional causes. However, the time is a prescribed time, and though not subject to any rules or reasonings of ours, is limited and regulated by the wisdom of God. He wounds, and He heals in His own appointed moment. None that continue waiting upon Him, and seeking salvation in the means which He has directed, shall be finally disappointed. Sooner or later He gives them, according to His promise, beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness (Isaiah 61:3). This warfare is accomplished, when they rightly understand, and cordially [sincerely] believe the following clause:

“Her iniquity is pardoned.” Though the sacrifices under the law had an immediate and direct effect to restore the offender, for whom they were offered, to the privileges pertaining to the people of Israel considered as a nation or commonwealth, they could not of themselves cleanse the conscience from guilt. It is a dictate of right reason, no less than of revelation, that it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sin (Hebrews 10:4) For this purpose the blood of Christ had a retrospective efficacy, and was the only ground of consolation for a convinced sinner from the beginning of the world. He was proposed to our first parents as the seed of the woman who should break the serpent’s head (Genesis 3:15). In this seed Abraham believed and was justified, and all of every age who were justified were partakers of Abraham’s faith. Therefore the Apostle teaches us, that when God set Him forth as a propitiation through faith in His blood, He declared His righteousness in remissions of sins that were past (Romans 3:25) For though we may suppose God would have declared His mercy in forgiving sin upon any terms, no consideration but the death of His Son could have exhibited His righteousness—that is His holiness, justice and truth, in the pardon of sin. True

penitents and believers were pardoned and saved under the law, but not by the law. Their faith looked through all the legal institutions to Him who was represented and typified by them. But the types [prophetic symbols] which revealed Him, in a sense concealed Him likewise. So that though Abraham saw His day, and rejoiced, and a succession of the servants of God foresaw His glory and His sufferings and spake of Him; yet in general the Church of the Old Testament rather desired and longed for, than actually possessed, that fullness of light and knowledge concerning the person, offices, love and victory of MESSIAH, which is the privilege of those who enjoy and believe the Gospel (Hebrews 11:39, 40).

Yet great discoveries of these things were vouchsafed [graciously granted] to some of the prophets, particularly to Isaiah, who on account of the clearness of his views of the Redeemer and His Kingdom, has been sometimes styled a fifth Evangelist. The most evangelical part of his prophecy, or at least that part in which he prosecutes that subject with the least interruption, begins with this chapter and with this verse. And he proposes it for the comfort of the mourners in Zion in his day. We know that the Son of God, of whom Moses and the prophets spake, has actually come (1 John 5:20)—that the atonement for sin has been made, the ransom for sinners paid and accepted. Now the shadows are past, the veil removed, the night is ended, the dawn, the day is arrived, yea the Sun of Righteousness is arisen with healing in His beams (Malachi 4:2). God is reconciled in His Son, and the ministers of the Gospel are now authorized to preach comfort to all who mourn under a sense of sin, to tell them all manner of sin is forgiven for the Redeemer's sake, and that the iniquity of those who believe in Him, is freely and abundantly pardoned.

2. Though the last clause of the verse does not belong to the passage, as selected for the Oratorio, it is so closely connected with the subject that I am not willing to omit it: "She hath received at the LORD's hand double for all her sins." The

meaning here cannot be that her afflictions had already been more, and greater, than her sins had deserved. The just desert of sin cannot be received in the present life, for the wages of sin is death and the curse of the law, or in the Apostle's words, is everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and the glory of His power (2 Thessalonians 1:9) Therefore a living man can have no reason to complain under the heaviest sufferings. If we acknowledge ourselves to be sinners, we have likewise cause to acknowledge, that He hath not dealt with us according to our iniquities.

Nor can the words be so applied to MESSIAH as to intimate that even His sufferings were more than necessary, or greater than the exigency of the case required. The efficacy of His atonement is indeed greater than the actual application, and sufficient to save the whole race of mankind if they truly believed in the Son of God. We read, that He groaned and bled upon the cross, till He could say, It is finished, but no longer. It becomes us to refer to infinite Wisdom, for the reasons why His sufferings were prolonged for such a precise time; but I think we may take it for granted that they did not endure for an hour or a minute longer than was strictly necessary. The expression seems to be elliptical, and I apprehend that the true sense is, that Jerusalem should receive blessings double, much greater than all the afflictions which sin had brought upon her. And in general to us, to every believing sinner, that the blessings of the Gospel are an unspeakably great compensation, and overbalance, for all the afflictions of every kind with which we have been, or can be exercised. Afflictions are the fruit of sin, and because our sins have been many, our afflictions may be many. "But where sin has abounded, grace has much more abounded" (Romans 5:20).

Before our Lord healed the paralytic man who was brought to Him, He said, Be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee (Matthew 9:2). His outward malady rendered him an object of compassion to those who brought him; but he appears to have been sensible of an inward malady, which only Jesus could

discern, or pity, or relieve. I doubt not but his conscience was burdened with guilt. An assurance therefore that his sins were forgiven, was sufficient to make him be of good cheer, whether his palsy be removed or not. To this purpose the Psalmist speaks absolutely and without exception. “Blessed is the man,” however circumstanced, “whose transgression is forgiven, whose iniquity is covered” (Psalm 32:1). Though he be poor, afflicted, diseased, neglected or despised, if the Lord imputeth not his iniquity to him, he is a blessed man. There is no situation in human life so deplorable, but a sense of the pardoning love of God can support and comfort the sufferer under it, compose his spirit, yea make him exceedingly joyful in all his tribulations; for he feels the power of the blood of Jesus cleansing his conscience from guilt, and giving him access by faith to the Throne of Grace, with liberty to say, Abba, Father; he knows that all his trials are under the direction of wisdom and love, are all working together for his good, and that the heaviest of them are light, and the longest momentary, in comparison of that far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, which is reserved for him in a better world (2 Corinthians 4:16, 17). Even at present in the midst of his sufferings, having communion with God, and a gracious submission to His will, he possesses a peace that passeth understanding, and which the world can neither give nor take away.

I shall close this preliminary discourse with a few observations, by way of improvement.

(1). How justly may we adopt the Prophet’s words, “Who is a God like unto Thee!” (Micah 7:18). Behold and admire His goodness! Infinitely happy and glorious in Himself, He has provided for the comfort of those who were rebels against His government, and transgressors of His holy law. What was degenerate Israel, and what are we, that He should thus prevent [favour] us with His mercy, remember us in our low estate, and redeem us from misery, in such a way and at such a price! Salvation is wholly of grace: “by grace ye are saved” (Ephesians

2:5, 8); not only undeserved, but undesired by us, till He is pleased to awaken us to a sense of our need of it. And then we find everything prepared that our wants require, or our wishes can conceive: yea, that He has done exceedingly beyond what we could either ask or think.

Salvation is wholly of the LORD (Psalm 3:8), and bears those signatures of infinite wisdom, power and goodness, which distinguish all His works from the puny imitations of men. It is in every way worthy of Himself, a great, a free, a full, a sure salvation. It is great, whether we consider first, the objects miserable and hell-deserving sinners; second, the end, the restoration of such alienated creatures to His image and favour, to immortal life and happiness; or third, the means, the incarnation, humiliation, sufferings and death of His beloved Son. It is free, without exception of persons or cases, without any conditions or qualifications, but such as He Himself performs in them, and bestows upon them. It is full, including every desirable blessing; pardon, peace, adoption, protection and guidance through this world, and in the world to come eternal life and happiness, in the unclouded, uninterrupted enjoyment of the favour and love of God, with the perfect and perpetual exclusion of every evil.

(2). When the Lord God who knows the human heart would speak comfort to it, He proposes one object, and only one, as the necessary and all-sufficient source of consolation. This is MESSIAH. Jesus in His person and offices, known and received by faith, affords a balm for every wound, a cordial [tonic] for every care. If we admit that they who live in the spirit of the world, can make a poor shift to amuse themselves, and be tolerably satisfied in a state of prosperity, while everything goes on according to their wish; while we make this concession, (which however is more than we need allow them, for we know that no state of life is free from anxiety, disappointment, weariness, and disgust) yet we must still consider them as objects of compassion. It is a proof of the weakness and disorder

of their minds, that they are capable of being satisfied with such trifles.

Thus, if a lunatic conceives his cell to be a palace and that his chains are ornaments of gold, if he calls a wreath of his straw a crown, puts it on his head, and affects the language of majesty—we do not suppose the poor creature to be happy, because he tells us that he is so; but we rather consider his complacency in his situation, as an effect and proof of his malady. We pity him, and if we were able, would gladly restore him to his senses, though we know a cure would immediately put an end to his pleasing delusions.

But, I say, supposing or admitting the world could make its votaries happy in a state of prosperity—it will, it must, leave them without resource in the day of trouble. And they are to be pitied indeed, who, when their gourds are withered, when the desire of their eyes is taken from them with a stroke, or the evil which they most feared touches them, or when death looks them closely in the face, have no acquaintance with God, no access to the Throne of Grace, but being without Christ, are without a solid hope of good hereafter, though they are forced to feel the vanity and inconstancy of everything here. But they who know MESSIAH, who believe in Him, and partake of His Spirit, cannot be comfortless. They recollect what He suffered for them, they know that every circumstance and event of life is under His direction, and designed to work for their good; that though they sow in tears, they shall soon reap in joy; and therefore they possess their souls in patience, and are cheerful, yea comfortable, under those trying dispensations of Providence, which when they affect the lovers of pleasure, too often either excite in them a spirit of presumptuous murmuring against the will of God; or sink them into despondency, and all the melancholy train of evils, attendant on those, who languish and pine away under the depression of spirits, emphatically styled a broken heart.

(3). To be capable of the comfort my text proposes, the mind

must be in a suitable disposition. A free pardon is a comfort to a malefactor, but it implies guilt; and therefore they who have no apprehension that they have broken the laws, would be rather offended, than comforted, by an offer of pardon. This is one principle cause of that neglect, yea contempt, which the Gospel of the grace of God meets with from the world. If we could suppose that a company of people who were all trembling under an apprehension of His displeasure, constrained to confess the justice of the sentence, but not as yet informed of any way to escape, were to hear this message for the first time, and to be fully assured of its truth and authority, they would receive it as life from the dead. But it is to be feared, that for want of knowing themselves, and their real state in the sight of Him with whom they have to do, many persons who have received pleasure from the music of the Messiah [Oratorio], have neither found, nor expected, nor desired to find, any comfort from the words.

2. The Harbinger [Forerunner]

“The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a high-way for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it” Isaiah 40:3-5.

The general style of the prophecies is poetical. The inimitable simplicity which characterizes every part of divine revelation, is diversified according to the nature of the subject: and the magnificence and variety of imagery which constitute the life and spirit of poetry, evidently distinguish the style of the Psalms, of Isaiah, and the other poetical books, from that of the historical, even in the common versions. The various rules and properties of Hebrew poetry are not, at this distance of time,

certainly known. But the present Bishop of London (Dr Lowth), in his elegant and instructive lectures on the subject, and in the discourse prefixed to his translation of Isaiah, has fully demonstrated one property. It usually consists either of parallel, or contrasted sentences. The parallel expressions (excepting in the book of Proverbs) are most prevalent. In these the same thought, for substance, expressed in the first member, is repeated, with some difference of phrase, in the following; which, if it enlarges or confirms the import of what went before, seldom varies the idea. Almost any passage I first cast my eye upon, will sufficiently explain my meaning. For instance, in the fifty ninth chapter of Isaiah:

Verse 1. "Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; Neither His ear heavy, that it cannot hear:"

Verse 9. "Therefore is judgment far from us, Neither doth justice overtake us; We wait for light, but behold obscurity; For brightness, but we walk in darkness."

So in chapter 55.

Verse 2. "Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? And your labour for that which satisfieth not? Hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, And let your soul delight itself in fatness. "

So likewise in Psalm 2.

Verse 4. "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: The LORD shall have them in derision."

Verse 5. "Then shall He speak unto them in His wrath, And vex them in His sore displeasure."

These specimens may suffice for my present purposes. The knowledge of this peculiarity of the poetical idiom, may often save us the trouble of enquiring minutely into the meaning of every single word, when one plain and comprehensive sense arises from a view of the whole passage taken together. This

observation applies to the first of the verses in my text. Though it be true that John the Baptist lived for a season retired and unnoticed in a wilderness, and began to preach in the wilderness of Judea, the expression, The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, does not merely foretell that circumstance. The verse consists of two parallels. The Prophet, rapt into future times, hears a voice proclaiming the approach of MESSIAH, and this is the majestic language:

*In the wilderness prepare ye the way of the LORD;
Make straight in the desert a high-way for our God.*

The wilderness and the desert are the same here, as likewise in chapter 35 where the happy, the sudden, the unexpected effects of His appearance are described:

*The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad.
And the desert shall rejoice, and blossom like a rose.*

Now to see, by the eye of faith, the glory of the Redeemer in His appearance; to see divine power preparing the way for Him; to enter into the gracious and wonderful design of His Salvation; to acknowledge, admire and adore Him as our God, must afford a pleasure, very different from that which the most excellent music, however well adapted to the words, can possibly give. The latter may be relished by a worldly mind; the former is appropriate, and can only be enjoyed by those who are taught of God.

When the Eastern monarchs travelled, harbingers went before to give notice that the king was upon the road; and likewise proper persons to prepare his way, and to remove obstacles. Some of them, (if we may depend upon history) in the affectation of displaying their pomp and power, affected extraordinary things upon such occasion. For man, though vain, would appear wise; though a sinful worm, he would fain be accounted as great. We read of their actually having filled up valleys, and levelled hills to make a commodious road, for

themselves or their armies, through places otherwise impassable. The Prophet thus illustrates great things by small, and accommodates the language and usages of men to divine truth. MESSIAH is about to visit a wilderness world, and those parts which He blesses with His presence, shall become the garden of the Lord. Till then it is all desolate, rocky, and wild. But His way shall be prepared. Mountainous difficulties shall sink down before Him into plains. In defiance of all obstacles His glory shall see it, for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

The leading ideas respecting MESSIAH'S appearance, suggested by this sublime representation, are:

1. The state of the world at His coming—A wilderness.
2. The preparation of His way—"Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low."
3. The manner and effects of His manifestation—"And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it."

1. The word wilderness, I suppose, generally excites the idea of an intricate, solitary, uncultivated, dangerous place. Such is the description Jeremiah gives of that wilderness, through which the Lord led Israel, when He had delivered them from Egypt. "A land of deserts and of pits, a land of drought and of the shadow of death, a land that no man passeth through, and where no man dwelt" (Jeremiah 2:6). The world, in which we sojourn for a season, does not appear to us in this unpleasing view at first. The spirit and the things of it, are congenial to our depraved inclinations; and especially in early life, our inexperienced hearts form high expectations from it, and we rather hope to find it a paradise, than a wilderness. But when the convincing power of the Holy Spirit opens the eyes of the understanding, we awake as from a dream; the enchantment by which we were deluded is broken, and we then begin to judge rightly of the world; that it is a wearisome wilderness indeed, and that our only important concern with it, is to get happily out of it. In a spiritual view, a wilderness is a significant emblem of the state

of mankind, both Jews and Gentiles, at that period which the Apostle calls the fullness of time, when God sent forth His Son (Galatians 4:4).

Israel, once the beloved people of God, was at that time so extremely degenerated that, a few individuals excepted, the vineyard of the Lord, so signally protected, yielded only wild grapes (Isaiah 5:4). Though they were not addicted to imitate the idolatry of the heathens, as their forefathers had been, they were no less alienated from the true God, and their wickedness was the more aggravated, for being practiced under a professed attachment to the forms of His law. They drew nigh to God with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him (Mark 7:6). Their very worship profaned the temple in which they gloried, and the holy house of prayer, through their abominations, was become a den of thieves. They owned [acknowledged] the divine authority of the Scriptures, and read them with seeming attention, but rendered them of none effect, through the greater attention they paid to the corrupt traditions of their elders. They boasted in their relation to Abraham as their father, but proved themselves to be indeed the children of those who had persecuted and murdered the prophets (Matthew 23:30, 31).

The Scribes and Pharisees who sat in the chair of Moses, and were the public teachers of the people, under an exterior garb of sanctity, of prayer and fasting, were guilty of oppression, fraud and uncleanness: and while they trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others, their real character was a combination of pride and hypocrisy. Therefore, He who knew their hearts and saw through all their disguises, compared them to painted sepulchres, fair to outward appearances, but full of filth and impurity within (Matthew 23:27). From the spirit of these blind guides we may judge of the spirit of the blind people, who held them in admiration, and were willingly directed and led by them. Thus was the faithful city become a harlot. It was once full of judgment; once righteousness lodged in it, but now murderers (Isaiah 1:21). Such a wilderness was Judea when

MESSIAH condescended to visit it.

Among the heathens, ignorance, idolatry, sensuality and cruelty prevailed universally. Their pretended wise men had, indeed, talked of wisdom and morality from age to age. But their speculations were no more than swelling words of vanity, cold, trifling, uncertain, and without any valuable influence, upon themselves or upon others. They had philosophers, poets, orators, musicians and artists, eminent in their way; but the nations reputed to be the most civilized, were overwhelmed with abominable wickedness equally with the rest. The shocking effect of their idolatry upon their moral principles and conduct, not withstanding their attainments in arts and science, is described by the Apostle in the close of the first chapter of his epistle to the Romans. With great propriety therefore the state of the world, both Jew and Gentile, considered in a moral view, is compared by the Prophet to a wilderness—a barren and dreary waste. The pursuits and practices of the world were diametrically opposed to the spirit and design of that Kingdom which MESSIAH was about to set up; and therefore, as the event proved, directly disposed to withstand His progress. But,

2. Before His appearance a way was prepared for Him in the wilderness.

The Providence of God, by a gradual train of dispensations, disposed [set in order; adjusted] the political state of mankind in a subservience to this great event. All the commotions and revolutions which take place in the kingdoms of this earth, are so many detached parts of a complicated but wisely determined plan, of which the establishment of MESSIAH'S Kingdom is the final cause. The kings and politicians of this world are not aware of this. God is not in their thoughts. But while they pursue their own ends, and make havoc of the peace of mankind, to gratify their own interests and ambition, and look no higher, they are ignorantly and without intention, acting as instruments of the will of God. The wrath of man is overruled to His praise and His purpose (Psalm 76:10), and succeeds so far as it is instrumental

to the accomplishment of His designs, and no farther. While they move in this line, their schemes, however judiciously laid, and whatever disproportion there may seem between the means they are possessed of and the vast objects they aim at, prosper beyond their own expectations, but the remainder of their wrath He will restrain. Their best projected and best supported enterprises issue in shame and disappointment, if they are not necessary parts of that chain of causes and events which the Lord of all has appointed. Thus Sennacherib, when sent by the God whom he knew not, to execute his displeasure against the kingdom of Judah, had, for a time, a rapid and uninterrupted series of conquests (Isaiah 37:26-29): but his attempt upon Jerusalem was beyond the limits of his commission and therefore failed.

Among the principal instruments appointed to prepare a way in the wilderness for MESSIAH, and to facilitate the future spread of His Kingdom, we may take note of Alexander the Great; and this designation secured his success, though the extravagancies, excesses and rashness, which marked his character, were sufficient to have rendered his undertakings abortive, had he not been in the hand of the LORD of hosts, as an axe or a saw in the hand of the workman. By his conquests the knowledge of the Greek language was diffused among many nations; and the Hebrew Scriptures being soon afterward translated into that language, an expectation of some great deliverer was raised far and wide, before the MESSIAH appeared. When this service was fulfilled, the haughty presumptuous worm [Alexander] who had been employed in it was no longer necessary, and therefore was soon laid aside; all his proud designs, for the establishment of his own family and dominion, perished with him. His empire was divided towards the four winds of heaven, and this division likewise contributed to bring forward the purpose of God (Daniel 8:8). For each of the four kingdoms established by his successors, being thus separated, became a more easy prey to the Roman power. This

power, which had been gradually increasing and extending in the course of several hundred years, was at the height, about the time of our Lord's birth. The greatest part of the habitable earth which was at that time distinctly known, was united under one empire composed of various kingdoms and governments, which, though once independent and considerable, were then no more than Roman provinces; and as all the provinces had an immediate connection with Rome, a way was thus prepared and an intercourse opened on every side for the promulgation [proclamation] of the Gospel.

Among the Jews, the professing people of God, a way was prepared for MESSIAH by the ministry of His harbinger, John the Baptist, who came in the spirit and power of Elijah, (as had been foretold of him by the prophets, particularly by the last of the prophets, Malachi) preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, and proclaiming that the Saviour and His Kingdom were at hand. He who sent him accompanied his mission with a divine power. A multitude of persons, of various descriptions, were impressed by his message, insomuch that John himself seems to have been astonished at the numbers and characters of those who came to his baptism.

When the ministry of John had thus previously disposed the minds of many for the reception of MESSIAH, and engaged the attention of the people at large, the MESSIAH Himself entered upon His public office, on the same scene and among the same people. As He increased, John willingly decreased. So the morning star ceases to be seen as the sun advances above the horizon. This distinguished servant of God having finished his work, was removed to a better world. Not in the triumphant manner in which Elijah was translated, but as he came to announce a new dispensation, under which believers were to expect opposition and ill treatment, to walk by faith, and frequently be called to seal their testimony with their blood, he was permitted to fall a sacrifice to the revenge of a wanton woman; and though we are assured that none of the race of

Adam was greater in the estimation of God than he, his death was asked and procured as the reward of an idle dance (Matthew 6:11; 14:8-11).

3. The latter of my text describes the manner and immediate effects of MESSIAH'S appearance during His personal ministry, with an intimation of its future and more extensive consequences – “The valleys shall be exalted.”

A valley is an emblem of a low condition. Such was the condition of most of our Lord's followers; but His notice and favour exalted them highly. He came to preach the Gospel to the poor, to fill the hungry with good things, to save the chief of sinners, to open a door of hope and salvation to persons of the vilest and most despicable characters in human estimation. Such, for instance, was the woman mentioned by the Evangelist Luke (Luke 7:37, 38). The Pharisees thought our Lord dishonoured Himself by permitting such a one to touch Him, nor had she a word to say in her own behalf.

But the compassionate Saviour highly exalted her, when He vouchsafed [graciously agreed] to plead her cause, to express His gracious acceptance of her tears and love, and to assure her that her sins, though many, were forgiven. Very low likewise was the state of the malefactor on the cross; he had committed great crimes, was suffering grievous torments, and in the very jaws of death (Luke 23:42). But grace visited his heart, he was plucked as a brand out of the fire, and exalted to Paradise and glory. The world accounts the proud happy, and honours the covetous if they be prosperous. But true honour comes from God. They who are partakers of the faith and hope of the Gospel, and have interest in the precious promises, are, indeed, the rich, the happy, the excellent of the earth, however they may be unnoticed or despised by their fellow-creatures. The honour of places, likewise, is to be considered in this light. Bethlehem, though but of little note among the thousands of Judah, was rendered more illustrious by the birth of MESSIAH, than Babylon or Rome. The Galileans were held in contempt by the inhabitants of

Jerusalem, as a mean and provincial people; but the places in Galilee which our Lord frequently visited, or where He sometimes resided, are spoken of as exalted unto heaven, by the honour and privilege of His presence, though some of them were no more than fishing towns. And so at this day, if we have spiritual discernment, we shall judge that a little village, where the Gospel is known, prized and adorned by a suitable conversation, has a dignity and importance far preferable to all the parade of a wealthy metropolis, if destitute of the like privileges.

On the contrary, “Every mountain and hill shall be brought low.” MESSIAH came to pour contempt on all human glory. He detected the wickedness, and confounded the pride of the Scribes and Pharisees and rulers; and made it appear that what is highly esteemed among men, the summit of their boasted excellency, is worthless, yea, abomination in the sight of God (Luke 16:15). And by living Himself in a state of poverty, and associating chiefly with poor people, He placed the vanity of the distinctions and affluence which mankind generally admire and envy, in the most striking and humiliating light. Such, likewise, was and will be the effect of the Gospel. When faithfully preached, it is found mighty through God, to the pulling down of strongholds, high thoughts, and every species of self-exaltation. When the convincing Word touches the heart, it has an effect like the hand-writing which Belshazzar saw upon the wall (Daniel 5:6). In that day the lofty looks of man are humbled, and his haughtiness bowed down (Isaiah 2:11); he dares no longer plead the goodness of his heart, or trust to the work of his hands. A sense of forgiveness and acceptance through the Beloved, received by faith in His atonement, lays him still lower; he now renounces as loss, for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus the Lord, all that he once esteemed his gain, and is glad that he has nothing to trust or glory in but the cross (Philippians 3:7, 8). Farther, every mountain that opposes the Kingdom of MESSIAH, in due time must sink into a plain (Zechariah 4:7).

Though the nations rage, and the rulers take counsel together, He who sits in the heavens will support and maintain His own work, and all their power and policy shall fall before it.

“The crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places smooth.” He came to rectify the perverse disposition of the hearts of men, to soften and subdue their obstinate spirits, and to form to Himself a willing people in the day of His power. The Jewish teachers, by their traditions and will-worship [self-imposed worship], had given an apparent obliquity to [had deviated from] the strait and perfect rule of the law of God, and deformed the beauties of holiness, binding heavy burdens, and grievous to be borne upon the conscience; but He vindicated the law from their corrupt glories, and made the path of obedience plain, practicable and pleasant.

“Thus the glory of the LORD was revealed.” Not to every eye; many prejudiced because of His outward appearance, and by the low mistaken views the Jews indulged of the office and Kingdom of the MESSIAH whom they expected, could see no form or excellence in Him, that they should desire Him; but His disciples could say, “We beheld His glory” (John 1:14). He spake with authority. His Word was power. He controlled the elements, He raised the dead. He knew, and revealed, and judged the thoughts of men’s hearts. He forgave sins, and thus exercised the rights, and displayed the perfections of divine sovereignty in His own person. But the prophecy looks forward to future times. After His ascension He filled His apostles and disciples with light and power, and sent them forth in all directions to proclaim His love and grace to a sinful world. Then the glory of the LORD was revealed, and spread from one kingdom to another people. We still wait for the full accomplishment of this promise, and expect a time when the whole earth shall be filled with His glory—for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it! It is to the power of His Word that we owe the continuance of day and night, and the regular return of the seasons of the year. But these appointments are only for a

limited term; the hour is coming, when the frame of nature shall be dissolved. Heaven and earth shall pass away; but not a jot or tittle of what He has declared of His Kingdom of grace shall fail, till the whole be fulfilled.

Those of you who have heard the Messiah [Oratorio] will do well to recollect, whether you were affected by such thoughts as these, while this passage was performed; or whether you were only fascinated by the music, and paid no more regard to the words than if they had no meaning. They are, however, the great truths of God. May they engage your serious attention, now they are thus set before you.

The first of twenty booklets.

