

Sermons of John Newton

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

Booklet Two



3. The Shaking of the Heavens and the Earth - Haggai 2:6, 7
4. The Lord Coming to His Temple - Malachi 3:1-3

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3. The Shaking of the Heavens and the Earth and 4. The Lord Coming to His Temple

3. The Shaking of the Heavens and the Earth

“Thus saith the LORD of hosts, Yet this once, it is a little while, and I will shake the heavens, and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land: and I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with glory, saith the LORD of hosts” Haggai 2:6, 7.

God shook the earth when He proclaimed His law to Israel from Sinai. The description, though very simple, presents to our thoughts a scene unspeakably majestic, grand and awful. The mountain was in flames at the top, and trembled to its basis (Exodus 19:16-19).

Dark clouds, thundering and lightning filled the air. The hearts of the people, of the whole people, trembled likewise; and even Moses himself said, I exceedingly fear and quake. Then, as the Apostle, referring to this passage, observes, the voice of the LORD shook the earth. But the Prophet here speaks of another, a greater, a more important and extensive concussion. Yea, once a little while and I will shake not the earth only, but the heavens (Hebrews 12:26).

If we really believe that the Scriptures are true, that the prophecies were delivered by holy men, who spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit, and that they shall all be certainly fulfilled; how studious should we be to attain a right understanding of passages and events in which we are so nearly interested, that our hearts may be duly affected by them? But alas! experience and observation strongly confirm the remark of the poet, * “Men are but children of a larger growth” * from “ All For Love” by John Dryden (1631-1700).

If you put a telescope into the hands of a child, he will probably admire the outside, especially if it be finely ornamented. But the

use of it, in giving a more distinct view of distant objects, is what the child has no conception of. The music of the Messiah [Oratorio] is but an ornament of the words, which have a very weighty sense. This sense no music can explain, and when rightly understood, will have such an effect as no music can produce. That the music of the Messiah has a great effect in its own kind, I can easily believe. The ancients, to describe the power of the music of Orpheus, pretend, that when he played upon his harp, the wild beasts thronged around him to listen, and seemed to forget their natural fierceness. Such expressions are figurative, and designed to intimate, that by his address and instructions, he civilized men of fierce and savage dispositions. But if we were to allow the account to be true in the literal sense, I should still suppose that the wild beasts were affected by his music only while they heard it, and that it did not actually change their natures, and render lions and tigers gentle, as lambs, from that time forward. Thus I can allow that they who heard the Messiah [Oratorio], might be greatly impressed during the performance, but when it was ended, I suppose they would maintain the very same dispositions they had before it began. And many, I fear, were no more affected by the sublime declaration of the Lord's design to shake the heavens and the earth, than they would have been, if the same music had been set to the words of a common ballad.

The Jews when they returned from captivity, and undertook to rebuild the temple of the Lord, met with many discouragements. They were disturbed by the opposition and arts of their enemies, who at one time so far prevailed, as to compel them, for a season, to intermit the work. And when the foundation of the temple was laid, the joy of those who hoped soon to see the solemn worship of God restored, was dampened by the grief of others, who remembered the magnificence of the first temple, and wept to think how far the second temple would come short of it (Haggai 2:3; Ezra 3:12). In these circumstances the prophets Haggai and Zechariah were sent to animate the people by a promise, that inferior as the second temple might appear, compared with that which Solomon built, the glory of the latter house should be greater than the former (Haggai 2:9). Had this depended upon a

profusion of silver and gold, the Lord could have provided it, for “The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, saith the LORD of hosts.” But the glory spoken of was of a different kind. The presence of MESSIAH in the second temple, would render it far more honourable and glorious, though less pompous than the temple of Solomon; and would be attended with greater consequences, than even the manifestation of the God of Israel on Mount Sinai. Then He only shook the earth; but under the second temple, He would shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land, to introduce the Kingdom of MESSIAH.

We may consider from the words,

1. A character of MESSIAH: “The desire of all nations.”

2. The effects of His appearance: “Shaking the heavens and the earth.”

3. His “filling the house with glory.” This close of verse 7 is not in the passage set to music, but it is an eminent part of the prophecy, and I shall not exclude it.

1. MESSIAH is styled, “The desire of all nations.” The propriety of this title may be illustrated by two considerations.

(1). Before He came into the world to save sinners, an expectation prevailed in many nations that a great deliverer and friend of mankind was at hand. This was, perhaps, partly the effect of some ancient traditions founded on the promises of God respecting the seed of the woman, the traces of which, though much corrupted by the addition of fables, were not worn out—but might be chiefly owing to several of the dispersions of the people of Israel, and imperfect notices derived from the Scriptures in their hands. The sense of many prophecies concerning MESSIAH, though misapplied, is remarkably expressed in a short poem of Virgil, written a few years before our Saviour’s birth. This eclogue [pastoral poem], of which we have a beautiful imitation in our own language, by Mr. Pope, affords a sufficient proof that the heathens had an idea of some illustrious personage, who would shortly appear and restore peace, prosperity, and all the blessings of their imaginary golden age to mankind. The miseries and evil with which the world was filled, made the interposition of such a

deliverer highly desirable. There were even a few among the heathens, such as Socrates and his immediate disciples, who seem to have felt the necessity of a divine teacher; and to be sensible that man, in a state of nature, was too depraved, and too ignorant, to be either able or disposed to worship God acceptably, without one. There is reason to believe that the revelation which we enjoy, though despised by too many who affect to be called philosophers in modern times, would have been highly prized by the wisest and best of the philosophers of antiquity. Socrates thought that men were not capable of knowing and expressing their own wants, nor of asking what was good for themselves, unless it should please God to send them an instructor from Heaven, to teach them how to pray. And therefore,

(2). The need that all nations had of such a Saviour, is sufficient to establish His right to this title, admitting they had no knowledge or expectation of Him. If we could suppose a nation involved for ages in the darkness of night, though they had no previous notion of light, yet light might be said to be their desire, because the light, whenever they should enjoy it, would put an end to their calamity, would answer their wants, and in that sense accomplish their wishes; for if they could not directly wish for light, they would naturally wish for relief. The heathens were miserably bewildered. They had a thirst for happiness, which could not be satisfied by any or all the expedients and pursuits within their reach. They had fears and forebodings of conscience for which they knew no remedy. They were so sensitive, both of their guilt and their weakness, that being ignorant of the character of the true God, and of that forgiveness which is with Him, in times of extremity they frequently offered the most expensive sacrifices to the objects of their idolatrous superstitions, even the blood and the lives of their children (Micah 6:6, 7).

When MESSIAH appeared, as He was the glory of Israel, so He was a light to the Gentiles, as we shall have opportunity of observing more at large hereafter. He therefore who came purposely to bless the nations by turning them from darkness to light, and from the worship of dumb idols to serve the living and true God, may justly be called their desire, though, in the time of

their ignorance, they could form no suitable conception of Him.

2. "I will shake the heavens and the earth." This part of the prophecy has been, in a measure, literally fulfilled. At His birth a new star appeared. At His death the sun withdrew its shining, the earth quaked, the rocks rent, the dead rose. During His life He often suspended and overruled the stated rules of nature, and exercised supreme power over the visible and invisible worlds. He shook the kingdom of darkness, spoiled principalities and powers, triumphing over them by His cross. He shook the kingdoms of the earth; the idols trembled and disappeared before His Gospel, till at length the Roman Empire renounced heathenism, and embraced the Christian name. But the language of prophecy is highly figurative. Mountains and trees, land and water, sun and moon, heaven and earth, often signify nations, people and governments. And particularly heaven and earth are used to denote the religious and political establishment of Israel; or, as we say, their constitution in church and state. This without doubt is a primary sense here. The appearance of MESSIAH shall be connected with the total dissolution of the Jewish economy. The whole of their Levitical institution was fulfilled, superseded and abrogated by MESSIAH, which was solemnly signified, by the rending of the veil of the temple from the top to the bottom at His death. And, a few years afterwards, the temple itself was destroyed. By which event, the worship of God, according to law, of which the temple service was an essential part, was rendered utterly impracticable. Their civil state likewise was dissolved, they were extirpated [uprooted] from the promised land, and dispersed far and wide among the nations of the earth. Though in one sense they are preserved by the wonderful Providence of God, as a distinct people, unaffected by the changes and customs around them; in another sense they are not a people, having neither settlement nor government, but living as strangers and foreigners in every country where their lot has been cast (Hosea 3:4). Nothing like this can be found in the history of mankind. It is an obvious, striking, and perpetual proof of the truth of the Scriptures. What was foretold concerning them by Moses and the

succeeding prophets, is accomplished to a demonstration before our eyes. How unlikely was it once that it should be thus! yet thus it must be, because the mouth of the LORD has spoken it. And all that He has spoken is equally sure. He will yet again shake the heavens and the earth, dissolve the frame of nature, and execute His threatened judgments upon all those who do not receive and obey His Gospel.

3. “He shall fill this house with glory.” He did so when He condescended to visit it in person. The blind and the lame came thither to Him and He healed them (Matthew 21:14-16). Children felt His power, and sang Hosanna to the Son of David, a title appropriate to MESSIAH; and when the Pharisees rebuked them, He said, “If these should hold their peace, the stones would cry out” (Luke 19:40). As the Lord in His own house, He purged the temple, and drove out those who profaned it, and not one of His enemies durst offer the least resistance to His will. And when He left it at the last time, with sovereign authority, He denounced that awful sentence, which was soon afterwards executed by the Romans, both upon the temple and the nation (Matthew 23:37).

His glory filled the temple when He was an infant, so that Simeon and Anna then acknowledged His character, and spake of Him to those who were waiting for the consolation of Israel (Luke 2:25-38). Especially His glory was manifested when He proclaimed Himself the fountain of life, and invited every thirsty weary sinner to come to Him, to drink and live forever (John 7:37).

The temple in Jerusalem has been long since destroyed. But He still has a house, “A house not made with hands.” This is His Church, comprising all the members of His mystical Body. He dwells in each of them individually; He dwells in and among them collectively. Where two or three are met in His name, where His ordinances are administered and prized, where His Gospel is faithfully preached and cordially [sincerely] received, there He is present in the midst of them. There His glory is seen, His voice heard, His power felt, His goodness tasted, and the favour of His name is diffused as a precious ointment, which refreshes the

hearts of His people, renews their strength, and comforts them under all their sorrows and cares. The glory and magnificence of the temple worship, even in the days of Solomon, was faint, compared with the glory displayed to the hearts of believers, who worship Him in spirit and truth, under the New Testament dispensation. But it can only be perceived by an enlightened and spiritual mind. To outward appearance all may be low and humiliating. The malice of their enemies has often constrained His people to assemble in woods and on mountains, in places underground; or, in the dead of night, to secret themselves from informers. But vaulted roofs, and costly garments, the solemn parade of processions, music and choristers, and the presence of nobles and dignitaries, are not necessary to constitute the glory of Gospel worship. It is enough that He, in whose name they meet, condescends to visit them with the power and influence of His Spirit, to animate and hear their prayers, to feed them with the good Word of His grace, and to fill them with joy and peace in believing. If they have these blessings they desire no more, they are compensated for all their difficulties and hardships; and however unnoticed and despised by the world, they can say, "This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:17). For they approach, by faith, the city of the living God, the Jerusalem which is above, to the worship that is carried on, day without night, by the "innumerable company of angels," and "the spirits of just men made perfect" (Hebrews 12:22, 23).

But every member of this mystical temple, being by nature afar off from God, experiences a previous change, which may be fitly described by the terms of my text. Before the LORD takes possession of His people, and in order to it, "He shakes the heavens and the earth." Their former views of God and of themselves, are altered by a light which penetrates the soul. All that they have been building in religion, until then, is shaken and overturned. Their vain hopes are shaken to the foundation. This concussion makes way for the perception of His glory as a Saviour. In this Day of His Power they are made willing to throw open the gates of their hearts, that the King of Glory may enter.

But as I do not stand here to amuse you with a declamation on a subject in which you are not immediately interested; and as my office as a preacher both warrants and requires me to address myself not only to your understandings, but likewise to your consciences, I must be allowed, before I conclude, to propose this question to your consideration: Is MESSIAH, the desire of all nations, the object of your chief desire? How much depends upon the answer! Do you wish to know your present state in the sight of God? If you are faithful to yourselves you may be satisfied, provided you will abide by the decision of the Scripture. God is well-pleased in his Son; if you are well pleased with Him, if He is precious to you, and the desire of your soul is supremely directed to Him, then you assuredly possess the beginning, the foretaste and the earnest of eternal life. If you so enter into the descriptions given in the Bible, of His person, love, office, and glory, as to place your whole dependence upon Him, to devote yourselves simply to Him, and to place your happiness in His favour, then you are happy indeed! Happy, even at present, though not exempted from a share in the afflictions incident in this mortal state. For your sins are pardoned, your persons are accepted in the Beloved; to you belong the promises of guidance, protection and supply through life, victory over death, and then a crown of glory that fadeth not away. To say all, in a few words, God is your Father, and Heaven is your home.

But on the other hand, If you trust in yourself that you are righteous and good, at least comparatively so; if your attachment to the business or the pleasure of the world engrosses your thoughts and application, so that you have no leisure to attend to the record which God has given of His Son, or no relish for the subject, you have been hitherto guilty of treating the most glorious display or the wisdom and goodness of God with contempt. Many persons thus employed and thus disposed, bear respectable characters in civil life, from which I do not wish to detract. But however amiable you may be in the judgment of your fellow-creatures, you are a sinner in the sight of God, and will be treated by Him as an enemy of His government and glory, if you finally persist in a rejection of His Gospel. The great point which will

determine your destiny for eternity, will be this, What think you of Christ? For it is written, “If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maranatha” (1 Corinthians 16:22). He must and will fall under the curse and condemnation of the law, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and the glory of His power. Today, therefore, while it is called today (for tomorrow is not ours) may you hear His voice, and flee for refuge to the hope set before you!

4. The LORD Coming to His Temple

“The LORD, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple; even the messenger of the covenant in whom ye delight: Behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts. But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? For he is like a refiner’s fire, and like a fullers’ soap,—and he shall purify the sons of Levi—that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness” Malachi 3:1-3.

“Whereunto shall we liken the people of this generation, and to what are they like?” (Luke 7:31). I represent to myself a number of persons of various characters, involved in one common charge of high treason. They are already in a state of confinement, but not yet brought to trial. The facts, however, are so plain, and the evidence against them so strong and pointed, that there is not the least doubt of their guilt being fully proved, and that nothing but a pardon can preserve them from punishment. In this situation, it would be their wisdom, to avail themselves of every expedient in their power for obtaining mercy. But they are entirely regardless [negligent; heedless] of their danger, and wholly taken up with contriving methods of amusing themselves, that they must pass away the term of their imprisonment with as much cheerfulness as possible. Among other resources, they call in the assistance of music. And amidst a great variety of subjects in this way, they are particularly pleased with one. They choose to make the solemnities of their impending trial, the character of the judge, the methods of his procedure, and the awful sentence to which they are exposed, the ground-work of a musical entertainment. And, as

if they were quite unconcerned in the event, their attention is chiefly fixed upon the skill of the composer, in adapting the style of his music to the very solemn language and subject with which they are trifling. The king, however, out of his great clemency and compassion towards those who have no pity for themselves, prevents them with his goodness. Undesired by them, he sends them a gracious message. He assures them that he is unwilling they should suffer: he requires, yea, he entreats them to submit. He points out a way in which their confession and submission shall be certainly accepted; and in this way, which he condescends to prescribe, he offers them a free and full pardon. But instead of taking a single step towards a compliance with his goodness, they set his message likewise to music; and this, together with a description of their present state, and of the fearful doom awaiting them if they continue obstinate, is sung for their diversion, accompanied with the sound of cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of instruments (Daniel 3:5). Surely, if such a case as I have supposed could be found in real life, though I might admire the musical taste of these people, I should commiserate their insensibility!

But is not this case more than a supposition? Is it not in the most serious sense actually realized amongst ourselves? I should insult your understandings, if I judged a long application necessary. I know my supposition must already have led your thoughts to the subject of the Messiah [Oratorio], and to the spirit and temper of at least the greater part of the performers, and of the audiences. The holy Scripture concludes all mankind under sin (Romans 3:9, 10). It charges them all with treason and rebellion against the great sovereign Lawgiver and Benefactor; and declares the misery to which, as sinners, we are obnoxious. But God is long-suffering, and waits to be gracious. The stroke of death, which would instantly place us before His awful tribunal, is still suspended. In the meantime He affords us His Gospel, by which He assures us there is forgiveness with Him. He informs us of a Saviour, and that of His great love to sinners, He has given His only Son to be an Atonement and Mediator, in favour of all who shall sue for mercy in His name. The character of this Saviour, His unspeakable

love, His dreadful sufferings, the agony He endured in Gethsemane, and upon the cross, are made known to us. And as His past humiliation, so His present glory, and His invitation to come to Him for pardon and eternal life, are largely declared. These are the principal points expressed in the passages of the Messiah [Oratorio]. Mr. Handel, who set them to music, has been commemorated and praised, many years after his death, in a place professedly devoted to the praise and worship of God; yea, (if I am not misinformed) the stated worship of God, in that place, was suspended for a considerable time, that it might be duly prepared for the commemoration of Mr. Handel. But, alas! how few are disposed to praise and commemorate MESSIAH Himself! The same great truths, divested of the music, when delivered from the pulpit, are heard by many admirers of the Oratorio with indifference, too often with contempt.

Having thus, as I conceive myself bound in duty, plainly and publicly delivered my sentiments, of the great impropriety of making the fundamental truths of Christianity the subject of amusement, I leave what I have said to your serious reflections, hoping it will not be forgotten; for I do not mean to trouble you often with a repetition of it. Let us now consider the passage before us. If you read it with attention, and consider the great ideas it suggests, and the emphatical language with which they are clothed, you will not, perhaps, think the manner of my introducing it wholly improper.

Malachi confirms and unites the prophecies of Isaiah and Haggai, which were the subjects of our two last discourses. John is the messenger, spoken of in the beginning of the first verse, sent to prepare the way of the Lord Then “the LORD Himself shall come suddenly to His temple,” that is, immediately after the appearance of His fore-runner, and with regard to the people in general, unexpectedly.

The question, “Who may abide the day of His coming?” intimates the greatness and solemnity of the event. If we take His coming in the extensive sense, to denote the whole of His sojourning here on earth, from His incarnation to His ascension, it is unspeakably the greatest of all events recorded in the annals of

mankind; though He lived in the form of a servant, and died the death of a malefactor, the vast consequences which depend upon His appearance under these humiliating circumstances, rendered it a manner of coming every way worthy of Himself. It afforded a more awful discovery of the majesty, glory, and holiness of God, than was displayed upon Mount Sinai, and proved a closer and more searching appeal to the hearts and consciences of men. To enter more into the spirit and meaning of the question here proposed, we shall briefly take notice of the following points which the words offer to our serious meditation. May the Holy Spirit, whose office it is to glorify the Saviour, enlighten our hearts to understand them, with application to ourselves!

1. The names which are ascribed to MESSIAH.
2. The suddenness of His coming.
3. The searching power of it in general, expressed by “a refiner’s fire” and by “fullers’ soap.”
4. Its purifying power on “the sons of Levi,” the priesthood in particular.

1. The names ascribed to the MESSIAH.

“The LORD.” It is a general rule with our translators to express LORD in capital letters, where it answers to Jehovah, in the Hebrew, and there only. But this place is an exception. The word here is not Jehovah, but Adonai. It is however, a name of God, though not incommunicable like the other, being frequently applied to kings and superiors. It properly implies authority and rule. As we say, A Lord and Master. In this connection it is undoubtedly a divine name. The LORD is said to come to His temple, to His own temple. It was a house consecrated to the God of Israel. The first temple He honoured with tokens of His presence; the second, He visited in person; on which account it exceeded the first in glory. MESSIAH, therefore, who appeared in our nature, and was known among men, as a man, and who is now worshipped both in heaven and upon earth, is the God of Israel. “He came to His own.” This doctrine of God manifest in the flesh, is the pillar and ground of the truth: The only foundation on which a sinner, who knows the just desert of his sin, can build a solid

hope of salvation, is, that Jesus Christ “is the true God and eternal life” (1 John 5:20). Unless this be admitted, the whole tenor, both of the Old and New Testament is unintelligible. To say that this doctrine approves itself to human reason in its present fallen depraved state, would be to contradict the Apostle, who asserts, that “no man can say that Jesus Christ is LORD but by the Holy Ghost” (1 Corinthians 12:3). But it is highly reasonable, to those who see that they must perish, without such an atonement as shall declare the righteousness of God, no less than His mercy, in the forgiveness of sin; who feel the necessity of holiness, in order to happiness; and are acquainted with the nature and variety of the snares, temptations, and enemies to which they are exposed. Such persons cannot venture their eternal concerns upon the dignity, or care, or power, or patience of a mere creature, however exalted or excellent; they must be assured, that their Saviour is Almighty, or they dare not trust in Him: nor would they dare to honour the Son as they honour the Father, to love Him with all their heart and soul and strength, to devote themselves absolutely to His service, and expect their supreme happiness from His favour and approbation, if they did not know that He is over all, God blessed for ever.

With respect to the inferior character He sustains in our nature and for our sakes, as the Father’s servant, He is styled, the Messenger of the covenant. He is the gift, promise, head and substance of the Everlasting Covenant. And He came Himself to establish the Covenant, and to declare and bestow the blessings it contained. “God who had before spoken at divers times and in sundry manners by His prophets, spoke in the fullness of time by His Son” (Hebrews 1:1); testifying to Him by a voice from Heaven, “This is my beloved Son, hear Him; in Him I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). To the same purpose our Lord spake of Himself. He prefaced His gracious invitation to all, without exception, who are weary and heavy laden, to come to Him for rest (Matthew 11:27, 28), with a declaration of His commission and authority saying, “All things are delivered unto me of my Father, and no one knoweth the Son but the Father, neither knoweth any one the Father, save the Son, and he to whom the Son will reveal Him.” The law was given by Moses (John 1:17);

the moral law to discover the extent and abounding of sin; the ceremonial law, to point out by typical sacrifices and ablutions, the way in which forgiveness was to be sought and obtained. But grace, to relieve us of the condemnation of the one, and truth answerable to the types [prophetic symbols] and shadows of the other, came by Jesus Christ.

It is farther said, “The LORD whom ye seek, and the Messenger in whom ye delight”—MESSIAH was the hope and desire of the true Israel of God, from the earliest times; and when He was born into the world, there was a prepared people waiting and longing for Him, as their consolation. The people at large likewise professed to expect great things from the coming of MESSIAH. But their expectations were low and earthly. They supposed that He would deliver them from the Roman yoke, and give them victory and power over the heathen nations. The more grievous bondage of sin under which they were enslaved, they were not sensible of, nor had they a disposition suited to the privileges and honours of the Kingdom He designed to establish; and therefore, their understandings being darkened by prejudice and prepossession, they could not discern His character. The prophecies which were read in their synagogues every Sabbath, marked out the time and circumstances of MESSIAH’S appearance, the places which He should principally visit, the doctrine He should teach, and the works which He should perform: but though all these particulars exactly applied to Jesus, they obstinately rejected Him, and proceeded to fulfil, what was farther foretold of His sufferings and death, with such a minute punctuality, as if they had designedly taken the prophecies for the rule of their conduct. Thus, by giving neither more nor less than thirty pieces of silver to His betrayer, by buying the potter’s field, and no other, with the money afterwards; by casting lots for one of His garments, and making a distribution of the rest; by piercing His side, contrary to the custom in such punishments, and by omitting to break His legs, which, from their treatment of the malefactors, who suffered with Him, seems to have been usual—in these and several other instances, they acted, though unwittingly, as if it had been their design and study to accomplish

the Scriptures to their own confusion and condemnation.

2. This was the reason why His coming to His temple was to them *sudden*. Though long foretold and long expected, and though the precise time of His Advent, and the accompanying signs, were accurately defined and described, yet when the season arrived He came suddenly, unlooked for and unknown. He came upon them in an hour that they thought not of, and in a manner of which they were not aware. When He stood in the midst of them, they knew not that it was He. How dreadful does sin harden and infatuate the hearts of men! The Jews, in our Saviour's time, furnish us with a striking instance that it is possible for people fatally to miscarry even with the greatest advantages and means for information in their possession. They accounted themselves the people of God, made their boast of His law and their relation to Abraham. But they hated MESSIAH, and crucified Him, who was the object of Abraham's faith. The opposition of their leaders and teachers was the most malicious, for many of them acted against the light of their minds and were often convicted in their consciences, though they refused to be convinced. But an ignorant attachment to these blind guides was ruinous to their blind followers, who, though they sometimes, from a view of His mighty works, were struck with astonishment, and constrained to say, Is not this the Son of David? were at length influenced by their priests to prefer a murderer to Him, and, with a clamorous importunity, to compel Pilate to put Him to death. The like misapprehensions produce the like effects among professed Christians today. We likewise have the Scriptures, but how many who admit their authority in words, live willingly ignorant of their contents and act in direct contradiction to their tenor! The power of the Saviour is likewise displayed among us: His preached Gospel is daily made effectual to the great purposes to which it was vouchsafed [graciously given], yet multitudes reject it with no less pertinacity [persistent determination], than the Jews rejected Him in person. At length, death surprises them and they sink into darkness beyond recall. To them, the LORD may be said to come suddenly, for they think not of Him till they actually find

themselves at His tribunal. And this, not only when they are cut off by a sudden stroke, but often when their dissolution is most gradual, and everyone about them can perceive its approach by their countenances; they themselves, though wasting with disease, worn out with pain, still flatter themselves with hopes of amendment and recovery to their last gasp; lingering death is to them no less sudden than if they were killed by a flash of lightening.

3. It is asked, “Who may abide the day of His coming?” The effect is compared to a refiner’s fire, and to fullers’ soap. The refiner’s fire penetrates the metal, and thereby searches, discovers, and consumes the dross. The fullers’ soap also, though it does not destroy the texture of the cloth, cleanses it by removing, as it were consuming the spots and defilement which are found in it. The idea conveyed by these illustrations is the same. The day of His coming is a day of trial, a trial which issues in the purification of the work of God in His Church, and in the detection and destruction of everything in it which is contrary to His will.

The coming of MESSIAH may be taken in several senses.

To the Jews according to the promise of God repeated from age to age, He came in person. “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among them” (John 1:14). The term in the original alludes to the visible symbol of the divine presence, which resided in the tabernacle and temple. Thus for a season He resided among them, in a temple not made with hands, but formed, by the immediate agency of the Holy Spirit, in the womb of a virgin. This was a happy time to those who received and acknowledged Him. But the bulk of the nation could not abide the trial which His appearance exposed them to; they were proved by it to be but reprobate and counterfeit silver. The thoughts of many hearts were revealed (Luke 2:35). Many specious characters were detected. The pretended sanctity and outward strictness of the Scribes and Pharisees, was evidenced to be mere hypocrisy. He exposed them in their true colours, and upon many occasions put them to shame and to silence.

And where His Word did not cleanse like soap, it burnt like fire, and the persons and places that rejected Him, were rendered inexcusable. Their great privilege of seeing His wonderful works, and hearing His gracious words, being abused, aggravated their guilt and condemnation, and made their doom heavier than that of Sodom and Gomorrah. To them the Day of the LORD, which in their own sense they professed to desire, was darkness and not light (Amos 5:18). If He had not come and spoken to them Himself, they had not had sin (John 15:22). That is, comparatively; He found them great sinners, and they would have been such if He had not visited them. But after He had spoken to them, and spoken in vain, they had no cloak for their sin. From that time they were deprived of every shadow of plea, excuse, or extenuation. And all their former wickedness was light, compared with the enormous crime they were guilty of in rejecting and crucifying the Son of God. By refusing Him, they rendered their case helpless and hopeless, because there is no other name but His, given among men, whereby they might be saved. But He cleansed those who received him, He removed their guilt, their fears, their ignorance. He gave them a clean heart and a new spirit. Yet to these also He was as a refiner's fire, and as fullers' soap. They likewise had prejudices and selfish tempers, which were not at once removed. He called them to a state of suffering and self-denial, to forsake all, and to take up their cross daily for His sake.

In another sense, His coming is not restrained to a particular time. Wherever His Gospel is preached, the Lord is come. It is by the Gospel He rides forth prosperously, conquering and to conquer (Psalm 45:4). Thus He has promised to be present with His ministers, "and wherever two or three are met in His name," to the end of the world. Thus He is come to us. And the effects are the same, as when He was personally upon earth. His Gospel still discovers the thoughts of many hearts. Many persons who till then were reputed religious by the contempt they cast upon this wonderful expedient of infinite wisdom and love to save sinners, manifest their ignorance and hatred of the law and holiness of God, and that the religion they pretend to is a lifeless form, destitute of love and power. To them, though in itself a favour of

life, it proves a favour of death. It provokes their enmity, increases their obduracy, and leaves them without excuse. But it is life indeed to those who receive it. They are raised by it from a death of sin, unto a life of righteousness and peace. Their tempers, desires, pursuits, and hopes are changed and elevated. Old things pass away, and all things become new to them, according as it is written, "If any man be in Christ Jesus, he is a new creature" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

He comes to individuals by the power of His Spirit. This makes the Word of His Gospel effectual. For the Kingdom of God is not in word only, but in power. When He thus visits the hearts of sinners, His Word is like fire and soap; "quick and powerful, and sharper than a two-edged sword" (Hebrews 4:12). Then they feel and tremble, and cry out with the Prophet, Woe is me, I am undone. But in this way their dross is consumed, their defilement removed. When He thus wounds, He likewise heals. He gives them faith; by faith they look unto Him, and are enlightened and saved.

We surely expect that He will come again. Not as He once came, in a state of humiliation. The Babe of Bethlehem, the Man of Sorrows, who hung, and bled, and died upon the cross for our sins, will return in glory. "Behold He cometh in the clouds, and every eye shall see Him" (Revelation 1:7). Concerning this day, emphatically called the day of the LORD, we may well say, "Who may abide it?" To those who have not been the subjects of His refining operations here, He will then be a consuming fire. That great Day (for which all other days were made), when the LORD shall descend with the voice of the archangel and the trump of God, will "burn as an oven, and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble, and the Day that cometh shall burn them up" (Malachi 4:1). Where then shall the impenitent ungodly sinner appear? But it will be a joyful day to them that love His appearing. He will arise upon them, as the Sun of Righteousness, with healing in His wings; He will wipe away their tears, vindicate their characters, acknowledge them before the assembled world, and say unto them, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you" (Matthew 25:34).

4. It is particularly said, "He will purify the sons of Levi," that they may offer an offering to the LORD in righteousness. "The sons of Levi," the priests, the officiating ministers of God, "were gone (departed) out of the way, and had corrupted the covenant of the Lord, and thereby had caused many to stumble" (Malachi 2:8, 9); they dishonoured their office, and became themselves vile and contemptible. Thus they went on from bad to worse, till the men of that generation filled up the measure of iniquity of their forefathers, by the rejection of MESSIAH. He also rejected them. The blasted barren fig tree (Matthew 21:19), which withered to the very root at His Word, was an emblem of their condition. In a little time, wrath came upon them to the uttermost; they saw the temple in which they had trusted, and which they had profaned, destroyed by fire, and the greater part of them perished. But a remnant of them was purified. We read that after His ascension, a great company of priests were obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7). And His apostles and disciples were sent forth with a new spirit, and in a new character, to offer and to serve in righteousness. The purport of this passage has been repeatedly exemplified under the Christian dispensation. A declension from the simplicity and purity of worship, principles, and morals, was visible very early in the Church. The progress of it was rapid, especially from the time of Constantine. When the persecution ceased, and a tide of wealth and worldly honours flowed in upon those who by their profession, were bound to be patterns of humility and self-denial to others, from that period, till the Reformation, ecclesiastical history affords us little more than a detail of such instances of pride, intrigue, oppression, and cruelty, under the pretext of religion, as had not been known among the heathens. And the nations which were relieved from the chains of darkness of popery, at the Reformation, did not long preserve much more than a name and a form to distinguish them. In most countries, the state became the idol of the church, and the church the creature of the state. How it is with us in this nation, I need not say. The facts speak for themselves. It is a mournful fact that the ministry is become contemptible; nor is it difficult to assign the cause. But we are favoured with the Gospel, and are eye-witnesses of its

purifying power. It still produces the effects, which marked its progress when preached by the apostles. It enlightens the dark mind, softens the hard heart, heals the wounded spirit; and many persons who before were burdensome to society, are rendered by it ornamental and useful. When every other argument and motive has failed of success, the consideration of the mercies of God in Christ, revealed by the Gospel, constrains the believing sinner to present himself a living, willing, holy sacrifice unto God. Thus being purified by the blood of Jesus, he offers to the Lord a sacrifice in righteousness. Such principles and aims are essential to a Christian minister. He knows the terrors of the Lord, and has tasted of His goodness. He is constrained by love, the love of Christ and the love of souls. He preaches as the Apostle did, Jesus Christ and Him crucified; a subject which, though despised and reproached by the formal Jew, and the sceptical Greek, is evidenced by its efficacy to be the wisdom and power of God. Such ministers may be, and frequently are, depreciated and disregarded; but they cannot be contemptible, until integrity, benevolence, and usefulness are the proper objects of contempt.

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