

Sermons of Ralph Erskine



1. The Vanity of Earthly Things and Worldly Enjoyments



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“Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity” Ecclesiastes 1:2.

The words of a king are commonly reckoned very witty: the words of a wise king, speaking by experience, deserves special consideration; and much more the words of a wise king, speaking by divine inspiration, deserve the greatest regard, attention, and credit: all these do here concur. The words of our text are the words of Solomon king of Israel; the words of the wisest of mere men; the words of one who spoke from his own experience; and, moreover, who spoke by the inspiration of God.

The sum of the discourse stands in these two particulars:

1. That the chief good and chief happiness of the sons of man is not to be had in the creature, or in any worldly thing. And,

2. That it is only to be found in God in Christ, and in the true knowledge of him and gospel conformity of heart and life unto him; which he expresseth by fearing God and keeping his commandments: which presupposes a gospel-state of union to Christ by faith, and communion with him in his merit, for the justification of our persons; and of his spirit, for the justification of our hearts and lives.

The first verse gives an account of the penman of this book. Where we have a threefold description of him: from his present office, his pedigree, and his royal dignity.

1. He is called the Preacher: and commentators observe, that it comes from a word that signifies to “gather;” intimating, that now he was a penitent soul, gathered in from his wanderings, gathered home to his duty, and come at length to himself; and that now he was a preaching soul, gathering in straying souls to God: seeing he himself was reduced, here was his penitential sermon, his recantation sermon; wherein, from the bottom of his soul, he sadly laments his own folly, in promising himself satisfaction, in the things of this world, and in the forbidden pleasures of sense: which

now he finds more bitter than death. And hence two things should be learned.

(1). We should be persuaded here of Solomon's repentance after his fall. Those who think he fell totally and finally, are not only refuted by this, but by all the arguments which prove the perseverance of the saints, which are many and impregnable: and also by other arguments, which concern Solomon himself, viz. the name that he gets, Jedidiah, (2 Sam. 12:25), which signifies, "Beloved of the Lord." Now, whom God loves, he loves to the end. And more especially the testimony of Christ, that all the prophets are in heaven, (Luke 13:28). Now, Solomon was a prophet, seeing the whole scriptures were penned by no others than prophets and apostles, (2 Pet. 1:19, 20; Eph. 2:20).

(2). We should hence learn to accept of this book with the greater regard. The sun never shines more gloriously, than when it breaks out of some dark cloud, nor yet the graces of God's spirit, than when broken forth out of the clouds of sins and temptations, into repentance. And thus it was with David also, (Psalm 51).

2. The penman of this book here is called, The Son of David. And his calling himself the Son of David, teaches us, That he looked upon it as his great honour, not only that he was the son of a Prince, but the son of so good a man, a man after God's own heart; and that he looked upon it as a great aggravation of his sin, that he had such a father, who had given him such good education, and put up many prayers for him — Again, his calling himself the son of David, saith, that he looked upon this as an encouragement to his repentance, and a ground of his hope of mercy, seeing though David fell into sin, by which he should have been warned not to sin, yet David repented; and therein he took example from him, and found mercy as he did. — But there is more here. His calling himself the son of David, intimates his faith, that as he was the son of the promise; he was the son of David, concerning whom God had said, that though he would punish his iniquities with the rod, yet he would not break his covenant with him, (Psa. 89:32-34). It was comfortable to Solomon, that he was the son of David, both for the sake of the covenant and the promise made to David

and his seed after him, (2 Chron. 7:17,18). — In a word he calls himself the son of David, to procure the more reverence, that he was a prophet, the son of a prophet; and it should procure the more reverend acceptance of the doctrine of this book, for the penman's sake: for, though it is a little matter what the pen be, whether it be the pen of a goose, or a swan, or a raven; yet when God makes use of such an instrument, so richly adorned, it challenges from us the more due respect.

3. The penman of this book is here called, "King over Israel." This intimates that his sin was greatly aggravated, seeing God had raised him to a throne, and yet he had so ill-requited him; his dignity also, in being king of Jerusalem, the holy city, where God's temple was, made the ill example of his sin, and the influence it would have upon others, the more dangerous. It intimates also, that being such a one as a king in Jerusalem, what he preached and wrote, was to be the more regarded: for, "Where the word of a king is, there is power." He thought it no disparagement to him, though he was a king, to be a preacher. If men of honour would lay out themselves to do good, what a vast deal of good might they do! Solomon looked as great in the pulpit, preaching the vanity of the world: as in his throne of ivory ruling the people.

Here we may learn, that God uses instruments of all sorts in penning the scriptures: Kings, as David and Solomon; some herdsmen, as Amos; and Priests as Jeremiah; Fishermen, as some of the apostles: this he did, that all sorts might meet with style and phrase of speech suitable for them. — We may learn that it is no disgrace to any man, or any man's children to be preachers: Solomon and David, both kings and both prophets, are of the number; Solomon studying to teach the people knowledge, (Eccl. 12:9, 10). The Angels, higher than the highest man, are all ministering spirits, (Heb. 1:14). Yea, Christ, the Prince of the kings of the earth, was the great New Testament Preacher. — Thus you have the penman described in the title of the book; "The words of the Preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem."

The second verse lays before us the general doctrine of the book; "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is

vanity.” Where, more particularly, we have, 1. The Judgment past upon all earthly things. 2. The person passing this judgment.

First, To begin with the last of these; we have the Person that passes this judgment, that all is vanity; it is said to be the Preacher. I told you already what was the meaning of the word, viz., one that is gathered, by grace to God, who had learned, by his experience, the vanity of all things in time: and was convinced, that there was no real advantage in pursuing after these things. Who is it that thus speaks lightly of the world? Indeed, it was one who was a very competent judge, as much as ever any man was. Many speak contemptibly of the world, either because they are hermits, and know it not; or beggars, and have it not: But Solomon knew it, and had enough of it too; and he spoke of it as one having authority, not only as a king, but as a prophet and preacher; he spoke in God’s name, being divinely inspired. And, as some think, one main thing he designed, was to show that the everlasting throne and kingdom, which God had been lately promising to David and his seed, (for Christ was also the son of David) must be of another world: for all things in this world are subject to vanity; and therefore have not in them sufficient to answer the extent of that promise. If Solomon found all things to be vanity; then the kingdom of the Messiah must come, in which only we can inherit substance. And, indeed, the very end and design of our preaching to you, concerning the vanity of the world, is to recommend Christ to you; seeing though you should inherit all things your heart can desire in time, you do but inherit passing shadows and vanity: but in Christ you will inherit everlasting and substantial goodness, saith the Preacher, (Prov. 7:21).

Solomon set the seal of his testimony to the vanity of all earthly things, after the trial of them: they that have had the most trial of earthly comfort, are most ready to avouch, and most able to preach the vanity of them. Experience is a divine testimony, as being taken from the works of God, in the event of things coming to pass by providence: and experience is of great authority with men, as being an argument more sensible, and less subject to ignorance and error. And hence we may see the great difference between

earthly and heavenly things: for earthly things seem good, till men get a trial of them, and then they are found vain, altogether vain; but heavenly things seem vain, till men get a trial of them, and then upon a sufficient trial, they are found to be excellent.

“All is vanity, saith the Preacher.” There is one that draws a very strange inference from this word, viz., that reading is preaching; because Solomon calls his book, though read, the Preacher. But, in answer to this, Solomon doth not call his book, but HIMSELF, the Preacher. — And again, one might rather infer from this, that writing is preaching; and that one may deliver his sermon by writing. But, that reading is preaching, doth not follow from this. Why, in writing, a minister may and doth make use of spiritual gifts, requisite in a prophet or preacher, to the exercise of his ministerial gifts: but not so in reading, which even a schoolboy may perform, that never attained any spiritual gift at all. — Thus much concerning the person passing this judgment.

Secondly, We have the judgment past upon all earthly things, VANITY; “Vanity of Vanities, Vanity of Vanities, all is Vanity.” Where observe three things, 1. The subject of the determination; or the thing he passes his judgment upon, in the particle ALL. 2. The determination itself, or the judgment he passes upon them, it is vanity. 3. The aggravation of, or emphatic manner wherein he passes his judgment; “Vanity of Vanities, Vanity of Vanities, all is Vanity.”

1. The subject, or the thing he passes his judgment on, namely, ALL; viz., all that is in the world: all the pleasures, all the profits, all the honours, all the preferments, all the lusts of the world; all things under the sun that a man can set his heart upon; all worldly employments and enjoyments; all things besides God, and considered as abstract from him.

2. The judgment he passes upon all these is, VANITY. The things of the world are either to be considered in themselves, as the creatures of God, and so they cannot be called all vanity; because they were all very good, showing forth his power and glory; but consider them with respect to men, and his expecting satisfaction

in them, and thus they are vanity; they will disappoint them who seek happiness in them; they are vain: and not only so, but,

3. Observe the aggravation of this judgment, or the emphatic manner of the preacher's expression of this matter; they are not only vain, but vanity in the abstract; and not only so, but vanity over and over again, three several times repeated: As if he had said, They are vanity, vanity, vanity: and not only so, but the foundation of vanity: and therefore called, "Vanity of Vanities;" and again, "Vanity of Vanities:" intimating the vainest vanities; vanity in the highest degree, nothing but vanity; such a vanity as is the cause of a great deal of vanity: And again, not only this, but the redoubling of the expression, intimating the certainty of the thing, and with what a strong conviction the preacher spoke, what a deep sense he had of this vanity of all things. So that his judgment is here exaggerated, (1). By expressing it in the context, VANITY. (2). By calling it "Vanity of Vanities." (3). By repeating and redoubling this sentence, "Vanity of Vanities, Vanity of Vanities." By tripling the doctrine which he intended to make good, "Vanity of Vanities, saith the Preacher, Vanity of Vanities; all is Vanity." The truth of which doctrine he proved at large, by many cogent arguments, in the sequel of his sermon in this book.

The doctrinal proposition we intend to illustrate from these words, thus explained, shall be the following.

Observation: That all earthly enjoyments, and worldly things, are vain and empty.

And in speaking to Solomon's text here, viz., The emptiness and vanity of the world, we would incline, through divine favour, to do the following things.

I. Consider what it is in the world that is so vain and empty:

II. Inquire what is imported in its being vain, and vanity itself, and in the phrase, "Vanity of Vanities, Vanity of Vanities."

III. Offer some arguments to prove the truth of the doctrine, that all is vain and empty.

IV. Give the reasons of it, why it is so.

V. Deduce some inferences for the application, to show what improvement we ought to make of this doctrine.

I. We return to the first thing proposed, To consider what it is in the world that is so vain and empty. Here, for preventing all mistakes, and obviating every wrong turn of thought, in the progress of this discourse, I would have you remember, that I speak not of the things of the world, absolutely considered in themselves; for thus many things in the world are good and useful, in many respects, when used according to God's allowance: but I consider the world here, and the things of it, as wholly vanity, in the following respects.

1. When separate from God; without God the good things of the world are not seen as coming from him, nor improved for leading to him; but esteemed in themselves above God, so as men are lovers thereof more than lovers of God. And so,

2. When it is made a man's happiness, or any part of his happiness; and so he makes it his end, his satisfaction, his rest, his god: for thus many make the world their god, their belly their god.

3. When opposing or hindering the service of God: when it steals away the heart from duty; and steals away the heart from ordinances, and so obstructs the service of God.

4. When it furthers and promotes sin, and is made the fuel for feeding and maintaining corrupt lusts and affections: when it is but the food of pride and ambition, the food of covetousness and carnality, the food of sensuality and lasciviousness, or the like. Why, in such respects as these, the world, and things in it, ought to be looked upon as base and contemptible vanity: and to be despised, opposed, and mortified.

But now, if the question be asked, What is it in the world that is vain and empty? Why, saith the preacher, "All is vanity." This word comprehends more than we can tell; for we will not get through all that is included in it. We shall name a few of these things in the world that are but vanity.

1. All the profits and riches of the world are vanity; "He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity. When goods increase,

they are increased that eat them: and what good is there to the owners thereof, saving the beholding of them with their eyes?" (Eccl. 5:10, 11). Let a man find as much riches as ever Solomon found, he cannot find happiness therein. Where is it that satisfying riches are to be had? No where but in Christ: "Riches and honour are with me; yea, durable riches and righteousness," (Prov. 8:18). All the riches of grace and glory are to be found in Christ.

2. All the pleasures and delights of the world are vanity; "I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also is vanity. I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it?" (Eccl. 2:1, 2). See how he enumerates, in this chapter, manifold sensual pleasures; and the upshot of all is still, "All is vanity." No true pleasure shall we ever find but in Christ; Wisdom's "ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace," (Prov. 3:17).

3. All the honours and grandeurs of the world are vanity; "I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards. I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kinds of fruits: I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees. I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts. So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour," (Eccl. 2:5, 6, 8-10). Well, what was the upshot of all this worldly grandeur? Why, it was all vanity, (verse 11), "I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit." Where is true honour to be had? It is only in Christ; "Riches and honours are with him." They who get in to Christ, they become kings and priests unto their God: and this is the honour of all the saints.

4. All the wisdom and policy of the world is vanity; yea, even

the moral endowments of the mind, and the knowledge of arts and sciences. So long as a man is destitute of spiritual wisdom, let him have the knowledge of all that is knowable in time; let him have the utmost skill of mathematics, philosophy, astrology, astronomy; “All is vanity.” Solomon laboured to acquire wisdom, and actually attained a vast deal of it; and we have his verdict of the whole matter: “I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven. I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit — And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit. For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow,” (Eccl. 1:13, 14, 17, 18). Where will a man get true wisdom? Why, it is in Christ; he only can make you wise unto salvation, because he is made of God unto us wisdom, (1 Cor. 1:30). “In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,” (Col. 2:3). Solomon had no small share of knowledge, being indeed the wisest of all men; but he gives this for the motto of all worldly wisdom, VANITY. Well then, “Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom,” (Jer. 9:23).

5. All the strength and power of the world is vanity; “Let not the strong man glory in his strength.” Let not either kings or subjects glory in their strength, in the strength of their armies and allies. What says Solomon of this? “The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong,” (Eccl. 9:11). Where is that to be had that deserves the name of strength? It is only in Christ; “Be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might;” (Eph. 6:10). I can do all things through Christ strengthening me. He is the strength of Israel: and his name is a strong tower to which the righteous run and are safe, (Prov. 18:10).

6. All the beauty and bravery of the world is vanity; Beauty is vain, saith Solomon, (Prov. 31:30) — When God with rebukes doth correct man for his iniquity, he maketh “his beauty to consume like a moth: surely every man is vanity,” (Psa. 39:11). Solomon was famous for the beauty and bravery of his court, and the splendour of his government; but he saw all to be vanity: and

Christ preferred even the beauty of a pile of grass to him; for he saith of the lilies of the field, that Solomon and all his glory is not like one of these, (Luke 12:27). Such, indeed, is the fading beauty of men, so much thought of by many, that it is but skin deep, and fades like a flower. If you would be a true, spiritual, and durable beauty, it is to be had in Christ, whose Spirit and grace makes a man beautiful, and all glorious within, (Psa. 45:13). — Thou wast beautiful through my comeliness put upon thee, (Ezek. 16:14).

7. All the righteousness and feigned false religion of the world is vanity. There is much unrighteous righteousness in the world, much irreligious religion, much graceless grace, and faithless faith; “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees, (saith Christ) ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven,” (Matt. 5:20). “Neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love,” (Gal. 5:6). And again, “Neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature,” (Gal. 6:15). For, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see [“enter into” John 3:5] the kingdom of God,” (John 3:3). The natural religion that the world hath, is but vanity. If the righteousness even of the godly, be but filthy rags, and cannot avail him for justification; what account shall be made of the righteousness of those who are yet out of Christ, and are nothing but mere moralists, formalists, and hypocrites? If you would have righteousness, you must have it in and from Christ; he is the Lord our righteousness and made of God to us wisdom, righteousness, and sanctification. He has to give you both an imputed righteousness, for justifying you; and an imparted righteousness, for sanctifying you.

8. All the favour and friendship of the world is vanity; “Favour is deceitful,” (Prov. 31:30). They who put confidence in the favour and friendship of men, they will find themselves deceived: therefore, saith the prophet Micah, “Trust ye not in a friend; put ye not confidence in a guide: the best of them is as a brier: the most upright is sharper than a thorn hedge,” (Micah 7:4, 5). Where will you get a true friend? O seek to have Christ to be your friend: He is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother. His friendship doth not

vary like those friends that love you today, and hate you tomorrow.

9. All the fashions and customs of the world are vanity; they whirl about like the wind, as Solomon speaks, (Eccl. 1:6); and the vain eye is never satisfied with seeing them, (verse 8). There are many vain fashions of bodily gestures, vain fashions of apparel, vain artifices of the world; wherefore and of all other worldly vices, the apostle with, “Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind,” (Rom. 12:2). The best fashion and conformity that ever a soul studied is conformity to the Son of God; this study would be an evidence of election from eternity; “Whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son,” (Rom. 8:29). Whereas all other fashions, and fond studying of conformity to the world, is but a mark of vanity.

10. All the great and mean men of the world are vanity: this Solomon shows in this book, when he is proving that all is vanity. And his father David saith expressly, “Surely men of low degree are vanity, and men of high degree are a lie: to be laid in the balance, they are altogether lighter than vanity,” (Psa. 62:9). Here the prince in his robes, and the peasant in his rags are both declared to be vanity. Surely every man in his best estate, is altogether vanity, (Psa. 39:11). What is man to be accounted of? A piece of rotten dust. In wisdom they are vain: “The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain,” (1 Cor. 3:20). In power they are vain; therefore saith the Lord, “Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm,” (Jer. 17:5). In comfort they are vain; “They comfort in vain,” (Zech. 10:2). Let us never expect in man, what is not to be had in him: it is only in the God-man, Jesus Christ, that we ought to place our confidence, and expect our comfort: The true circumcision rejoice only in Christ Jesus, “and have no confidence in the flesh,” (Phil. 3:3).

In a word, all these things together are but vanity; satisfaction is not to be had therein: “I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity,” (Eccl. 1:14). The apostle gives a sum of all the things in the world, and writes vanity upon them; “All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of

the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof,” (1 John 2:16,17). All these things are vanity.

II. The Second thing proposed was, To enquire what is imported in its being called vain; nay, vanity itself: “All is vanity.” And to enquire into the emphasis of the phrase, “Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities.”

First, As to the first of these, viz., what is imported in its being called VANITY: “All is vanity.” It imports, among others, these eight following things.

1. VANITY here imports the unprofitableness of all things; “What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?” (Eccl. 1:3). And to this purpose, saith Christ, “What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Matt. 16:26). Treasures of wickedness profiteth nothing. The world is an useless thing to the soul; it cannot save the soul from hell: The redemption of the soul is precious, and ceaseth for ever, for any thing that either the world, or the things of the world can do for its recovery, (Psa. 49:8). As to the world, it cannot deliver a man from the sentence that shall pass at the great day; it will rather aggravate the misery.

2. All is vanity; the word imports emptiness: VAIN; that is, void of substance, worth, and sufficiency. Thus the words of Rabshakeh are said to be vain words, (Isa.31:5); that is, empty, having nothing but wind in them: even so the world is vain, i.e., empty: it promiseth great things, but performeth nothing; like the god of this world, that said to Christ, “All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me,” (Matt. 4:9). The world promises much, and boasts much: but yet can give nothing, and do nothing.

3. All is vanity; the word imports hurtfulness, while they make the heart more and more vain; and draw the affections away from God and heavenly things. They are hurtful; like a man lying down to rest upon a bed of thorns and briars: he shall never find the rest there that he would be at.

4. All is vanity; the word imports unsatisfactoriness: “the eye is

not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing,” (Eccl. 1:8). As there is no true profit, so no true comfort therein, abstract from God. It is but a vain comfort that men have in that which is but vanity.

5. All is vanity; the word imports falsehood and lying; “O ye sons of men, how long will ye love vanity, and seek after leasing?” (Psa. 4:2). And hence the things of the world are called lying vanities: “They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy,” (Jonah 2:8). The world seems to be something: but it is a lie; it is not what it appears to be.

6. All is vanity; the word imports frustration and disappointment: “If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, this man’s religion is vain,” (Jam. 1:26); that is, he will be disappointed; he deceiveth himself. Thus the world is a cheat and a deceiver.

7. All is vanity; the word imports folly; “Vain man would be wise, though man be born like a wild ass’s colt,” (Job 11:12). All is vanity, all is folly. “He that followeth vain persons, is void of understanding.”

8. All is vanity; it imports frailty and inconsistency; vanishing away as smoke: “the world passeth away, and the lust thereof,” (1 John 2:17). “All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as a flower of the field: the grass withereth, the flower fadeth: surely the people is grass,” (Isa. 40:6, 7).

Secondly, We proposed next to inquire into the emphasis of the phrase, “Vanity of vanities, vanity of vanities.” Why, this phrase, and the repetition of it, imports these six things.

1. The excessiveness of the vanity of these worldly things. Vanity implies, that they are not only vain, but exceedingly vain; as vain as vanity itself. “Vanity of vanities,” is, in the Hebrew, a superlative form of speech, to set forth the highest vanity: as the Song of Songs, i.e. the most excellent song; the “King of kings,” i.e. the most excellent king. So “Vanity of vanity,” i.e. the greatest vanity.

2. It imports the multitude and variety of vanities that are heaped up in earthly things: as Samson speaks in another case, “Heaps upon heaps,” (Judges 15:16). There are vanities upon vanities: one heap upon the top of another.

3. It imports the strangeness of these vanities; he speaks by way of admiration, to shew the wonderful and strange vanity of these things; O vanity of vanities! He breaketh forth into this exclamation.

4. It importeth the inexpressibleness of it; it cannot be uttered with words; and therefore the same words must be uttered again and again, to show what we cannot sufficiently comprehend or express, the vanity of things below.

5. It imports the fertility of these vanities of the world; one vanity begets another; one piece of vanity brings on another; therefore called “Vanity of vanities:” such vanity as is the cause of other vanities.

6. It imports the certainty of worldly things, and what impression it should have upon us, when vanity is five times repeated in this one short text; these repeated strokes should make impression upon us, to affect us with the certainty of the thing. Surely all is vanity.

III. We proceed to the Third thing proposed, viz., to offer some arguments to prove that all is vain and empty; or to prove the vanity and emptiness of the world.

1. The world is treacherous; it betrays both the hopes and the souls of men at once. How big is man with expectations of remote distant enjoyments! Like a man looking at a picture, or statue at a distance; but, coming near to it, and taking a close view, he sees it is but a cheat, a dead lifeless thing: so, when a man comes to the enjoyment of the world, he falls infinitely short of his expectations. Like children that think the cloud is just touching such a hill, and if they were at it they would be just in the cloud; and, when they go there, they find the cloud removed away to another hill. Yea, the world betrays the soul, as well as the hopes; it betrays a man’s soul to ruin: like sweet poison, it goes down pleasantly, but kills

presently. The silken cords of the world have taken away a prisoner; and they have proven their fetters, which they never could break again. As Judas said of our blessed Lord, “Whomsoever I kiss, take him, hold him fast:” so the world being the devil’s agent, says, “Whomsoever I kiss and embrace, and embraceth me mutually, and setteth his heart upon me; take him, hold him fast.” So the creature betrayeth the soul, as well as the hope of the man.

2. The world is vanity, because it is vexatious; for “All is vanity and vexation of spirit,” (Eccl. 1:14). You cannot grasp the thorn of this world but you must be hurt. — The world is vexation in the purchase of it. A man spends night and day for a conquest: he sits up late and rises early; sets his invention upon the rack, how to conquer such a fortune, how to make such a purchase. — The world is vexation in the possession of it: when a man hath it, what cares, what fears, what solicitude about the keeping of it! He knows not how to secure it. If but a tile or slate falls off his house, he thinks the whole fabric will be down next. If he takes but a penny out of a large sum, he thinks it will melt and diminish away to nothing. He is vexed in keeping it. — And again the world is vexation in the loss of it. When the man loses it, he cries, “Alas! they have taken away my gods, and what have I more? My hope is gone, my all is gone, my portion is gone.”

3. The vanity and emptiness of the world appears in this, that a little cross will embitter all the pleasures and enjoyments of time. Solomon saith, dead flies make all the box of the apothecary’s ointment to stink, (Eccl. 10:1). So the whole box of the world’s greatest enjoyments, one small cross, such as a toothache, a touch of the stone, of the colic or gout, will embitter all, and make all to stink. We have an eminent instance of this in Haman, (Esther 5:11-13). If any man in the world might have promised himself satisfaction from the world, Haman now might have done it: he was raised from a low degree to the highest pinnacle and dignity of a subject, being the chief minister of state to one of the greatest kings on earth. If a man be born to a great estate, it turns, as it were, natural to him; it never increases, never elevates him: but,

promotion from a low estate to an high, doth enhance the value of the estate, and gives a relish to the enjoyment, if we may speak so. Well, Haman had all riches; he had a numerous family, plenty of children: he was the greatest favourite of the king, and reckoned himself a favourite of the queen also; and yet, “all this avails me nothing,” saith he. Why? what is the business, man? what hath poisoned your box of ointment? There is a wretched Jew, saith he, an ill-natured, ill-mannered fellow, that will not give me a hat, when I go into the court, and come out again. And that marred all his happiness, because a poor man would not yield him obeisance. A little cross will embitter the greatest enjoyments.

4. The world’s emptiness and vanity appears in this, that it is so changeable, and of such a short duration. It is compared in scripture to the motion of an eagle; Riches take wings, “they fly away as an eagle towards heaven,” (Prov. 23:5). When they fly away, they will not fly like a tame bird, to return to you again; they go away like an eagle out of sight. Many a man thinks, by his good rights and security, by his heritable bonds, and the like, he will clip the wings of the world, that it shall not fly away from him: but, for all that, it will take the wings of the morning, whose wings cannot be clipped. The world is compared to the moon, (Rev. 12:1), which is sometimes full, and shining brightly; but instantly it changes again. Men are ready to say, in a worldly sense, as David in a spiritual, “My mountain standeth strong;” and, behold! instead of health, we have sickness; instead of reputation, we have disgrace; instead of ease, we have pain; instead of riches, we have poverty.

5. The vanity and emptiness of the world appears in this, that it will never be of service to you in a day of need. Are you in sickness? All the riches of the world will not heal you; it will not cure you of a gout or a gravel: make an experiment of it, lay your head on a pillow of gold, see if that will make you sleep sound. Nay, all the enjoyments of time will not ease you of the pain of a colic. And then, in the day of death, when death says, “I am coming, I am at the door; the tribunal is fixing to judge you:” what will the world avail you! Nay, it cannot secure you from the wrath of God, from a hell, from a tribunal.

IV. The Fourth thing proposed in the general method was, To give some reasons of the vanity and emptiness of the world, and unsatisfactoriness thereof. Why,

1. God alone is the centre of a man's soul; Christ alone is the bread of life, the solid food of the soul. God is the centre of the intellectual world, the centre of spirits; and no rest shall spirits, souls, have till they centre in him; and the soul that never centres in him, shall never find rest to eternity. Every body hath its centre; the stone goes downward, and the fire goes upward. Every body is, as it were, in motion, or hath a tendency to motion, if obstacles were out of the way, till it comes to its centre: now, God alone being the centre of the soul, the creature can never give rest to the soul; the soul is still in disquiet, till it come to a God in Christ, which is the true rest; "Return to thy rest, O my soul," (Psa. 116:7). The covetous man, if he has riches, will say, "Return unto thy rest, O my soul:" Soul, thou hast goods laid up for many years. But he was mistaken of his centre; for he had no rest at all: he was disinherited that night, and sent out of the world. No quarters for the soul in the creature; there is no suitableness to the soul in the creature. Why? The soul is a spirit; the creature is a body: the soul hath vast infinite desires; the creature is finite: the soul is eternal and immortal; the creature is but of yesterday, and perisheth tomorrow: and so there is no suitableness between the soul and the creature. It is only between God and the soul that there is a suitableness; and therefore the creature is empty and vain, and cannot satisfy the vast and immense desires of the immortal soul. But then,

2. There is the curse upon the creature, a manifold curse; a curse by Adam's fall, a curse after Cain's murder, a curse after the deluge, a curse upon every enjoyment of every wicked man: He is cursed in his basket and his store; cursed in his children, cursed in his table, cursed in all his comforts. How then can the creature, and worldly things, be any other than vanity and emptiness to us, seeing the curse is lying upon them since the fall! (Gen. 3:17).

3. All is vanity, because of the end for which God made them; they were made for us, not we for them. The Lord never designed

the things of the world for the use that men would turn them to, namely, to be a god, a portion, a happiness to them: and therefore they shall never find a happiness in them. And so,

4. Because they seek happiness in the creature, therefore they shall never find it in the creature: because they put confidence in it, therefore God will blast that confidence; “The Lord hath rejected thy confidences, and thou shalt not prosper in them,” (Jer. 2:37). Since the fall, man’s corruption makes him promise more from the creature, trust more to it, and delight more in it than before: the virtue of the creature is on the waning and decaying hand, yet man’s expectation from it is on the waxing and growing hand. How then can there be anything but disappointment and emptiness?

5. No wonder then that it is vain, empty, and unsatisfactory, seeing the world is the great occasion of sin, and the fuel of lust. Many corruptions are starved till the world minister to their support: and it is the root of manifold sins; “The love of money [the love of the world], is the root of all evil.” It is the root of damnable neglect of the gospel: One went to his farm, another to his merchandise, and made light of the gospel-offer, (Matt. 22:5). It is the root of heart-wandering from the Lord, and enmity against God; “The carnal mind is enmity against God. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” It is the root of unfruitfulness under the means of grace: The thorns of this world choke the good seed of the word. It is the root of woeful apostasy from the Lord; “Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world.”

V. The last thing proposed in the method was application of the subject; which we shall essay in an use of information, reproof, lamentation, examination, and trial; and in the whole study all brevity.

Use 1. The first use that we make of the doctrine then is for information. Is it so, That all earthly things, and worldly enjoyments, are vain and empty? Then we may hence see,

1. The folly of mankind, in placing their happiness where it

never was. Men would have happiness, but the general error is, they imagine the creature can give it: and therefore they pursue pleasure, and court honours, and hoard up riches, thinking their happiness lies there: but they are seeking the living among the dead; they are seeking hot water among cold ice, who seek happiness among the creatures. Alas! what a woeful exchange do they make, who sell their souls to commit sin, for any earthly benefit, which is but vanity! “They that observe lying vanities forsake their own mercy,” (Jonah 2:8). Temptations from earthly things may draw on sin like cart-ropes; but they are cart-ropes of vanity, (Isa. 5:8).

2. See what a great change sin hath made in the world; it doth, as it were, blast the virtue and beauty of the creature. The time was, before sin entered, when God saw all the creatures to be very good, (Gen. 1:31). Now, after sin hath blown upon them, he looks upon them again; and lo! all is vanity. Such a change will sin make in us, and in our counsels and courses, if it be not removed by the blood of Christ.

3. See what little reason they have to envy the wicked of their portion: they have all their portion in this world, (Psa. 17:14). What a portion must it beg when it is but a sowing of vanity, and a reaping [of] lies! “All is vanity and vexation of spirit.” Why should a godly man grudge when he sees the prosperity of the wicked, seeing it is all their portion? A godly man may have a portion in the world, but he never hath this world for a portion; no: The lines are fallen to him in more pleasant places; he hath a goodly heritage: The Lord is the portion of his soul.

4. See that the godly are no losers, though they should lose all things in the world for Christ’s sake. What makes them venture the loss of all for the cause and interest of Christ? Why, they know Christ to be all, and the world nothing but vanity. They may easily forsake all things, and follow Christ; for they lose but vanity, and reap solid comfort, solid happiness. We see this abundantly clear from Mark 10:29 and 30, — Jesus said, “There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel’s, but he shall

receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life.” This seems to be a contradiction: but, though they lose their houses and lands &c., yet they shall reap them equivalently: yea, what is more than the equivalent; they reap true comfort here, and true happiness hereafter: so that their light afflictions work for them a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.

Use 2. The next use that we make of this doctrine, is for reproof. Since all things here are but vanity, this doctrine reproves those that set their hearts upon vanity, upon the world, so as to forget God, and Christ, and religion, and their souls: O, my dear friends, what will it profit a man, though he gain the whole world, if he lose his own soul? All is but wind and vanity, that the world can afford. What will become of the worldling in the day of death, when they must part with these things? What a miserable parting must it be, if you have no other thing for your happiness! I mean not to persuade men to a voluntary poverty; so the church of Rome make some of her votaries swear to be beggars all their life time; and they have gone, and abstracted from all secular affairs, under pretence of employing themselves wholly in devotion: and yet many of them are so ignorant, that they know nothing at all of religion. I have read of one who lived always in a mountain, and was appointed to spend his whole time in religion: and he told that he cried to God, and said his Paternoster [a repetitious prayer containing a magic formula] all the day, over and over, and over again, to the Virgin Mary: just a horrible blunder in religion, a damnable delusion, that no man, in his wits, could be guilty of. They think that, by turning to a solitary desert, and abstract life, they may overcome the world: but as Dither saith well concerning it, “A monk in his closet says, he thinks he is crucified to the world, and the world to him; but, alas! poor wretch, he is crucified to Christ, and Christ is a stranger to him.”

But, sirs, the thing that we are reproofing is, that the world gets so much of your heart, and God so little. The creature should but have a small portion of your affections, if it be not the creature but

God, that is your portion. But, alas! many are like the great man, that, being asked if ever he saw an eclipse of the sun, said, "He had so much ado upon earth, he never had time to look up to heaven." Just so may it be said of multitudes in the world, they are so much taken up with the things of time, the vain and perishing things of the world, they never get time to look up into, and call upon God. Therefore we have reason to bewail the matter.

Use 3. Let our next use then be for lamentation, that, notwithstanding of the vanity of the world, yet many discover themselves to be wholly destitute of religion, by their inordinate desire after the world. For clearing this, I would show you, 1. What sort of a desire the wicked have after the world. 2. Prove and make it evident that their desires are after these vanities. 3. Show whence it is. 4. Point out the evil of it. And in all these we will see much ground of lamentation.

1. What sort of a desire is it that the wicked have after the world. Here we shall condescend on a fourfold desire they discover themselves to have after the world.

(1). It is an original desire; they are born with a world in their heart: anything in the world is better to them than God, or Christ. Had we continued in our original primitive integrity, the first words of the infant would have been the praises of God; the first breathings would have been after communion with God: but now they are after the world, and earthly things, which gratify the outward senses.

(2). It is universal, after anything that is in the world; "Who will show us any good?" The beggar, who wants grace, before he makes God his portion, he will rather make his staff or his meal-pock his portion; as well as the king his crown, or kingdom: "Who will shew us any good?" any good whatsoever, (Psa. 4:6).

(3). It is a strong and violent desire they have after the world notwithstanding all the experience they have of the emptiness and vanity of the world; yet they pant after the dust of the earth. If a man was panting for breath he would pant after the free air: but to pant after the dust, that stops the breath, that is very strange!

(4). It is a growing desire that the wicked have after the world

the more they drink, the more their thirst increases. O, saith the man, if I had a hundred pounds a year, I would live on it. Well, perhaps he gets it. Is he now pleased and satisfied? No. O, if I had a thousand pounds a year, I could be content. Well, perhaps he gets it. Is he content? No. He would have a million. Well, if he gets that, is he satisfied? No, by no means. I would have a kingdom, a crown. Well, if he gets that, is he content? No. I must be the son of Jupiter; I must be a little god, and an universal monarch. Well, is Alexander the Great content with the whole world under his command? No. O if there were more worlds for me to conquer? — There is the nature of the desire that the wicked have after the world.

2. The second thing on this use was, To prove and make it evident, that the desire of the wicked is after the world. This will appear evident, if we consider these four things.

(1). It is clear from this, that they make the world their portion; they are content with it, they seek nothing else: Preserve me, O Lord, from the man that hath his “portion in this life, and whose belly thou fillest with thy hid treasure,” (Psa. 17:14).

(2). It is clear from this, that they prefer the world to all the duties of religion, and ordinances of divine worship: if Christ and the world come in competition, they choose the world and let Christ go. Public ordinances, family worship, secret and social prayer, all must stand by, that the world may get room. The gospel is slighted: Why? They choose their farms and merchandise, and their hearts are wedded to these; they will not be espoused to the Son of God.

(3). That the wicked desire the world is clear, if we consider the unwearied pains and diligence they are at about the world. O what toil and travel! What racking of thought, late and early, will they have about the world! What joy will they have about a good worldly bargain! What joy than ever they had in hearing, praying, reading, or any religious duty: they have gladness when their corn and wine increaseth. What sorrow, what tormenting grief are they haunted with, when they lose the world! Then they say, with Micah, “They have taken away my gods, and what have I more?”

They think nothing of God, or Christ, or heaven, if they want the world.

(4). It appears from this, they will not stand to commit the greatest sin, to make a purchase. If they can any way in the world purchase an estate, or a sum of money, even with the loss of their soul, they think they have made a good bargain. Judas thought he had made a good bargain, when he had sold the Prince of life for thirty pieces of silver. “Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world.”

3. We proposed next to inquire, whence is it, that wicked carnal persons have such a desire after the world.

(1). Man hath no self-sufficiency: he cannot, in the enjoyment of himself, be happy; hence he reckons himself miserable to be alone. Aristotle said, “A man that could live alone, was either a God, or an idiot.” Now, man seeks to be happy in the enjoyment of something besides himself: but he misses the true mark, and so seeks it in the world, where it cannot be found.

(2). God, who can only satisfy the soul, is out of sight: he is to them an unknown God; “The world by wisdom knew not God.” They are destroyed for lack of knowledge, saving knowledge.

(3). The world is at hand and a well-garnished world: this little ball, full of wind and vanity, blown up in the air, it sparkles and shines with a lustre and beauty, in their eye; and they are, like children, mightily taken with it.

(4). Because of the vanity of the heart. There is a world with them, answering the world without them: the lust of the eye within, answering the riches of the world without: the lust of the flesh within, answering the sordid pleasures of the world without; the pride of life, answering to the honours and grandeur of the world. And thus the world within them draws out the desire after the world without them.

4. We would next show the evil of this, to have the desire running only out after the world. Why,

(1). It is idolatry: hence covetousness is called idolatry, and ranked by the apostle, amongst the other things which are to be mortified, (Col. 3:5). Many worship gold in the coin, that will not

worship it in the image: “They say to fine gold, Thou art my confidence.”

(2). It is sacrilege. The heart and affections of a man are like the royal mines that are annexed to the crown. The heart of a man, his love and delight, should be devoted to God, and consecrated to him. Why hath God given him such vast desires? Was it to throw them out upon the world? No surely.

(3). It is monstrous folly to let the soul run out upon the world: “Be astonished, O ye heavens!” Why? what is the matter? “My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out (to themselves) cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water,” (Jer. 2:12, 13). It is the height of folly to conclude, that there is more excellency in the stream, than in the fountain; in the creature, than in the Creator.

(4). It is a degrading of the soul. If you saw an angel licking the dung-hill, would you not say, that is not food for such a glorious creature? It is far below it. Our souls are the younger brethren of angels, if we may be allowed the expression. Who can tell the difference exactly between the nature of angels and the souls of men? Now, for that heaven-born soul to lick the dust of the cursed serpent: what a degrading of it is this! — Is not all this then matter of lamentation, that Christ is despised, and the world embraced?

Use 4. The next use that we make of the doctrine, may be for examination. Try then whether you be weaned from the vain world, yea or not.

1. Are you content and satisfied with a little of the world’s good? And can you bear much of the world’s evil? Have you got a discovery of Christ, even such as darkens all the glory and excellency of the world; and been brought to consider, that you have a better portion than the vanity of time? Can you consider, that the heir of all things, the Son of God, had no place to lay his head, had not a penny in his purse? Women came and ministered unto him; a fish came and gave him as much as paid his tribute to Caesar. Are you deaf to the reproaches of the world, so as the loss of its applause doth not break your heart? Are you deaf to the profits and honours of the world, so as the want of them doth not

afflict you.

2. If you be weaned from the vanity of the world, then you will bear the want of the world with profound submission. If God, in providence, take your houses, your lands, your children, your riches, your loving friends and dear relatives, you will lay your hand on your mouth, and your mouth in the dust, and justify God; "In all this Job sinned not." You will see your all in God and Christ: "My God liveth, he is mine inheritance:" for you cannot be disinherited, if God be alive. Whereas the wicked saith in this case, "They have taken away my gods, and what have I more?" Their all is gone.

3. If weaned from the world, your affections will not ebb and flow with the world. There are some fountains that have immediate communication with the sea; whenever the sea flows, they flow; when the sea ebbs, they ebb and dry up. If it be thus with you, when the candle of providence shines upon your tabernacle, then you rejoice at it, and dance to it; and when it is removed, then you roar, and weep, and pay a tribute of tears: this is a token you are not weaned from the world. As for the believer, when the world goes out, the Lord comes in its room, and makes him joyful and cheery: and this has such an effect upon him, that he would be content to loose a wife, a child, a worldly comfort every day, upon condition he got God in the room of them.

4. If you be weaned from the world, you will know what it is to carry your closet-frame to your worldly affairs with you. There are some people who have more of God upon their spirit, more fellowship with heaven in their shop, selling their wares, or when they are about secular work, than others have in their closet upon their knees: more of God sitting at their trade, than others in the house of God, hearing a good sermon. Some will have more intercourse with Heaven, at their own table, than ever the worldling had at a communion table. They carry a heavenly frame to their worldly and earthly employment. As for others, they bring the world still along with them; they bring it to the church, as well as to the market; they are glued to it.

Use 5. We shall improve the doctrine in an use of Exhortation. If all be vanity, then, O seek to have your hearts disengaged from all things in the world; be persuaded to forsake lying vanities, (Jonah 2:8). If it be inquired, What is it to forsake the world? We might give both a negative and a positive reply to this. — Negatively, It is not to go out of the world. It is not to forsake personal society; though a vicious society must be forsaken. It is not to vow a voluntary poverty, with the Papists. It is not to be idle and improvident. But, positively, we are not to forsake it in the four following respects.

1. In respect of the immoderate use of the enjoyment of the world, (1 Cor. 7:29-31). We are to use it as stewards, that are to give an account.

2. In respect of service. Be not servants or slaves to it; for you cannot both serve God and mammon.

3. In respect of confidence: trust not to it. Although you have worldly advantages, make them not your staff, your stay, your choice jewels.

4. In respect of adherence; be not glued to the world. Let not the world be like the skin on the hand, that will not easily come off; but like the glove on your hand, or the hat on your head, that you can easily part with.

Try your repentance by this doctrine, which was the evidence of Solomon's repentance. Such as see nothing but glory and goodness, in these outward things, Satan hath bewitched them, (Matt. 4:8); but such as see the extreme vanity of them, have repented with Solomon.

We shall now conclude the subject, by laying before you the following remedies against a worldly disposition. Consider, for this end, the seven following particulars.

1. These vanities will not yield you pleasure in the time of the greatest trouble; they cannot ease you of the least pain. When you make a gash in your conscience, and wound your spirit, and so expose yourselves to the wrath of God, what will the things of the

world avail you? Who loved the world better than Judas did? But when God burnt his fingers with it, if we may be allowed the expression, then he threw it away with a fury. What will become of you at death, man? Will it be any comfort to you, that you die in a well-hung room? or that your chamber-floor is laid with silver? or that you die possessed of such a large estate, or ample fortune? Will not the man then cry out, “O if I had but spent some of this time in securing an interest in Christ, that I have bestowed in hunting after the world, that can now stand me in no stead!”

2. Seek a law-work; something of it is absolutely necessary to shake the world out of its place: He will shake heaven and earth, (Heb. 12:26). People will never leave the world till God shake it out of their heart.

3. Be conversant with your own sensible experience of the world. Have you never found the vanity and emptiness of it? Nay, hath it never been a sting and gall to your poor soul, that the world hath got all your time, thought, and care?

4. Be persuaded, that God in Christ is the only good. Seek the discovery of the glory of God in Christ. Persons may harangue never so long about the world’s emptiness and vanity; but they will never part with it till they get something better in the room of it. Something the man must have to set his heart upon: Therefore, till the unsearchable riches of Christ be discovered to the soul, so as your soul’s desire run out after him, the husks of the world will be your portion. People may think it is their principle, that the world is but vanity; yet still they are taken up with the vanity thereof, till they see the glory of God. The Lord is a full and sufficient good: he is a proportional good, suiting the soul: he is an everlasting good, suiting the immortal soul.

5. Believe the providence of God: he that made the world by creation, doth still preserve it by providence, allotting every man his portion, and by making every man’s condition in the world best for him: “Your heavenly Father taketh care of you,” saith Christ.

6. O beware of valuing yourselves for what you have of the world: I assure you, in God’s name, it will be one of your

challenges when death comes, or some time a-day or other, Oh! I neglected my poor soul! Like the woman that left her child in the flame; many leave their soul thus, to be consumed in the flame of divine wrath. Seek to have Christ for your everlasting portion. Many say, "Who will show us any good?" But say you, "Lord, lift thou upon me the light of thy countenance; then shall I have more gladness than they, when their corn and wine abounds." Never rest till you come to that, "Whom have I in heaven but thee?" And then you will be able to say also, "When heart, and flesh, and all fail, the Lord is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever."

7. Take up Luther's resolution, that you will not be put off with this world for a portion. If God, for holy ends, sees fit to embitter worldly felicity to you, pray for weaning influences, improve weaning dispensations and weaning words, weaning rods, and weaning ordinances.

