

FAMILY RELIGION

RECOMMENDED.

A

S E R M O N

PREACHED FROM

JOSHUA xxiv. 15.

By *WILLIAM ARTHUR.*

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M,DCC,XCIV.

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THE following Sermon was delivered, a few weeks ago, in the Rev. Mr. Robert Anan's church, Philadelphia, and, since, in the Rev. Mr. John M. Mason's, New-York. The Author does not pretend to be able to say any thing new on the subject; or to clothe his ideas with superior elegance of diction. His aim, in all his pulpit-performances, is to express himself with perspicuity and ease. He has contemplated, with grief, the total neglect of the worship of God in some families, and the carelessness, the formality attending it in other. If the following plain discourse be the means of doing good to any, his end is gained.

PHILADELPHIA, March 13th, 1794.

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FAMILY RELIGION

RECOMMENDED, &c.

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JOSHUA XXIV. 15.

—*As for me, and my house, we will serve  
the Lord.*

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MY BRETHREN,

**T**HE mournful neglect of Family Religion is, I believe, one of the principal grounds of Jehovah's controversy with us in this *day of trouble, of blasphemy, and of rebuke.* To recommend it to your attention is the design of this discourse. I wish to remind you of a few obvious considerations, which could not fail to recur to yourselves, were you to think seriously upon the subject. Religion has every thing to recommend it to us. It is its own reward. *Them, that honour me, says the gracious Redeemer, I will honour; and they that despise me shall be lightly esteemed.*

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The words of a dear friend, especially his *last* words, make a deep, a permanent impression upon our minds. We remember them with care. We meditate often upon them. The words of my text appear to have been part of Joshua's farewell address to Israel. He saw the day of his dissolution drawing nigh; when he was to receive the celestial reward of his services. We are told in the twenty-ninth verse of this chapter, that *he died, being an hundred and ten years old*. How impartial is death! The grim messenger knows no distinctions. The bravest champions of war fall promiscuously with the sons of cowardice. Like many, very many parents and governors, the Hebrew General was not unconcerned what course his family and followers pursued, after death removed him from them. No. Prompted by the duties of a wise commander, and impelled by the feelings of a pious father, he gathered the chosen tribes to Shechem; reminded them of the memorable appearances, which the God of Abram had made for them; and solemnly charged them to walk in his ways. How exemplary is his resolution in my text! As if he had said, "Children! Harken unto Joshua your father. Ere long you shall see me no more in this world.

world. With all the tenderness, which the immediate prospect of our separation inspires, I wish to put you in mind of your duty. Remember, I beseech you, *the one thing needful*. There is a necessity for you to make, if you have not already made, a choice in religion. How detestable is the idolatry of your fathers, who served strange Gods! Renouncing this, *fear the God of Israel, and serve him in sincerity and in truth.*—*As for me and my house, if I be able to influence their choice, we will serve the Lord.* I am a veteran in his service. But, instead of wishing to recant, instead of repenting my choice, I would make it a thousand times, were it practicable; and may my authority and example continue to speak to you, when I am sleeping in the dust!”

To excite you, my friends, to study a humble imitation, if not a holy emulation, of Joshua’s pious example, I will call your attention to the following considerations. And

FIRST, It belongs to God himself to unite and to dissolve families.

Says the Psalmist, *he maketh him families like a flock.* How conspicuous is divine wisdom

wisdom in the arrangement of human affairs! Jehovah, sitting in his holy habitation, at the helm of the universe, does all things wisely and well. No change, which takes place in either the world or the church, is to be attributed to the caprice of contingency; for, strictly speaking, there is no *chance*. Is not society, whatever form it assumes, under the superintendence of heaven? Is the conjunction of such and such persons in a domestic relation accidental? No. The sovereign Ruler among the nations determined that they should be born at a particular period; in a particular part of the world, and be connected as members of one household. Is it by chance that a master has such a servant, or a servant such a master? No. However inconsiderable and frivolous these things may appear to us, as if we presumed to think them unworthy Jehovah's attention, they were minutely marked out by his express fore-ordination. A hair cannot fall to the ground; or any creature from the serpent, that licks the dust, up to the exalted seraph before the celestial throne, move his body unobserved by him, whose eyes are like a flame of fire. Hence, if you are comfortably connected with pious relations, or, if otherwise, the dispensation

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is of your *Father in heaven*, who is a God of righteous judgment, as well as tender mercy, and had the wisest reasons for ordering it so! How affecting the consideration, that persons, however nearly and intimately related in one family, are soon to be separated! Such relations must, in the nature of things, be short-lived. If not suspended by some providential incidents, which separate the sons of a father, ordering the lot of one, in one place, of another, in another place, death shall, ere long, dissolve them; and then is the servant eternally free from his master. How useful is it to read often and carefully in the volume of divine providence! *Whoso is wise, and will observe these things, even they shall understand the loving kindness of the Lord.* How transient is the present state of things? Where are many families, on which the sun of prosperity once shone with meridian effulgence? Wherefore should the prosperous, in a worldly view, be elated? Wherefore should the afflicted be despondent? Has not this consideration a tendency to enforce domestic religion; for, as you are soon to be separated, should not this induce you to be cordial and active in the service of God?

SECOND,

SECOND, We will not, either as individuals, or as families, serve God aright, till he, by his Spirit and grace, incline and dispose us for our duty.

Where is the society, all the members of which worship him in spirit, and in truth? In how many houses is the Bible never read but to be turned into burlesque? Is it unlawful for a Mahometan to touch his alcoran with unwashed hands? Is *their* veneration for that system of lies, invented by the eastern impostor, such? Blush, Christians! blush and be ashamed. In how many houses are all the secret and social duties of religion totally neglected? Alas! the natural part of the human heart is *evil, only evil*, and that *continually*. How many are there, who, if some afflictive dispensation of divine providence, on account of which their animal spirits are depressed, does not force them to their duty, lie down, in the evening, and rise, in the morning, as though their knees were jointless and their sinews brass? What is the reason that we can receive our stated meals without so much as acknowledging our bounteous benefactor? Or what is the reason that we implore a heavenly blessing on one meal, not on another? Are not all  
equally

equally the gift of God? Why are many families not more regular, especially on the first day of the week? Is it lawful to give, or to receive visits from our irreligious acquaintance and friends on that day? In the 12th chap. of Zechariah, we read of every family mourning for their sins apart, the family of David, the family of Nathan, the family of Levi, the family of Shemei, *each apart*; and, if it be proper to fast in a solitary way, why not sequestrate ourselves on the first day of the week? Why is our conversation not more spiritual; not more in heaven, *whence we look for the great God, and our Saviour Jesus Christ?* Whether have political news, and foreign intelligence, respecting the nations of this world; or whether have the good news, the glad-tiding of salvation a greater tendency to sanctify the Sabbath? How were the disciples, going to Emmaus, employed on the first day of the week? Did they not talk together of all things, relating to the Redeemer, which had taken place at Jerufalem? And, testifying his approbation of their exercises, did he not draw nigh to them? After he left them, they said, *Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the Scriptures?*

THIRD, The duties of family religion are of the *stated*, not of the *occasional* kind.

Fasting, under the New Testament, is an occasional duty to be observed just as circumstances require. The duties, of which I am speaking, are rather stated and ordinary. There are, no doubt, seasons, in which especially, there is a loud call to them. Such is the season of adversity; for, says God, *I will go and return to my place till they acknowledge their offences, and seek my face; in their affliction they will seek me early.* But is not the voice of thanksgiving heard statedly in the tabernacles of the righteous? How good is it to show forth his loving kindness in the morning, and his faithfulness every night; presenting on the altar of a willing heart a gratulatory sacrifice to the gracious hearer of prayer! When we read of the daily sacrifice, which was offered by the pious Jews, why is the time, at which it was offered, mentioned in the New Testament, if not to show that it was divinely intended to be a pattern to individuals, and to families in all succeeding ages? It is called *the hour* of prayer. *Peter and John*, we are informed in the third of the Acts, *went up together into the temple at the hour of prayer, being*  
*the*

*the ninth hour.* If we divide the day into twelve hours, beginning at six in the morning, the ninth hour answers to three in the afternoon; the time when the evening sacrifice was offered, and the pious Jews went to the temple to be engaged in devotional exercises. Should not the Christian's habitation be a *Bethel*, a house of God, a little church, in which the head of the family presides as the priest? Before the commencement of the Levitical priesthood in the person of Aaron, fathers, elder brothers, princes, or every man for himself offered sacrifice; which is evident in the case of Abel, of Noah, of Abram, Isaac, Job, and other. In the New Testament, in which the name, *church*, is to be variously understood, we frequently read of a church in a particular house. One reason is, the regularity, the order observed in it. The church is called, *the house of prayer*. In her the Head has appointed a beautiful order, which is not to be changed. It is our duty to *walk about Zion, and go round about her*; to *tell the towers thereof*; to *mark her bulwarks*; to *consider her palaces*. In a manner equally express, he has required the families of Israel to worship him. Considering this, *I beseech you, brethren, by the mercies of God that ye present*  
*your*

*your bodies, a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.*

FOURTH, As families, we have many mercies to acknowledge, and many sins to confess.

Do not mistake me. I do not mean that domestic religion supersedes personal devotion. No. Each of us has many personal mercies to acknowledge. There is not a hair on our heads that we can call our own. Each has many personal sins to confess. It is recorded of a famous minister of the gospel, that he never saw a criminal going to the place of execution, but he smote upon his breast, and exclaimed, *the same evil is here!* Why should we not, in a social manner, acknowledge our divine benefactor as the giver of all good? Commendable was the conduct of Jacob. Testifying his gratitude to his divine deliverer, he made an altar, in Bethel, unto God, who answered him in the day of his distress, and was with him in the way, which he went. He commanded his household to *put away strange Gods* that were among them; to *change their garments*; to *be clean*; and to concur with him in expressions of gratitude. How readily did they comply! *They gave*

*gave unto Jacob all the strange gods that were in their hand, and all their ear-rings, which were in their ears, and Jacob hid them under the oak which was by Shechem. What, my brethren, shall we render unto the Lord for all his benefits towards us? Man is a social creature. He was originally intended for society, and fitted for it. Various are the views, in which reciprocal advantages result from social connections. Society is a chain of many links. With tender care, the parents rear up the children; and the children, when pious example and education are blessed, as the means of softening, and forming their hearts, are a comfort to the parents. The servant cannot be without the master, more than the master can be without the servant. Ah! how many family sins have we to confess! How often have the members of those little societies offended against each other? Are not husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants culpable, very culpable for neglecting the duties of their respective stations? In very expressive terms, did holy David lament both the irreligion and the adversity of his family. *Although my house be not so with God; yet he hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things and sure; for this is all**

*my*

*my salvation, and all my desire, although he make it not to grow.*

FIFTH, Family religion comes recommended to us by the example of the most eminent believers, who lived in both earlier and later times.

Are we not commanded to be followers of them, who have gone before us, and now inherit the promises; to walk in the good old path, in which our pious fathers walked? Says the Redeemer to the church, *If thou knowest not, O thou fairest among women, go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock, and feed thy kids beside the shepherds tents.* When Joshua said, *as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord,* was he the only person who ever formed this resolution? By no means. A luminous cloud of witnesses presents itself to our view. Let me remind you of Abram, the father of the faithful, and the friend of God, whose faith and obedience are famous in every age; for he has exhibited to mankind a noble pattern of heavenly graces, and virtues. Said the Searcher of hearts concerning him, *I know him, that he will command his children, and his household after him; and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that*  
*the*

*the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him.* This honorable testimony was given by One, who cannot be deceived by any specious appearance, or crafty affectation of zeal. I call it an *honorable* testimony. "I know Abram, that his respect for my authority; and his love to my laws, will induce him to command his household to serve me; not only the stated members of his family, but also every sojourner under his roof." How praiseworthy is David's resolution; who said, *I will walk within my house with a perfect heart!* A holy life is emphatically expressed by walking with God. Enoch, who was translated that he should not see death, walked with him. The phrase bespeaks a holy familiarity betwixt God and his people, which words are inadequate to express. As if the man according to God's own heart had said, "In the strength of grace, which is made perfect in our weakness, I resolve to set a proper example before my family by my pious conduct, conscientiously performing the duties, which are incumbent upon me as the head of it." But, say you, "These are Old Testament examples. What examples are there in the New?" The most illustrious instance that could be mentioned is Jesus him-

himself, who has left us an example that we should follow his steps. He was a father to his disciples, praying with them like a pious father with his children. We read of a Cornelius, who feared God with all his house; that is, I suppose, his family joined cordially in Jehovah's worship, with the devout centurion at their head. Says the Apostle, in the last chapter of his first epistle to the Corinthians, *Aquila and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord*, WITH THE CHURCH THAT IS IN THEIR HOUSE; in the last chapter of his epistle to the Colossians, *Salute the brethren, which are in Laodicea, and Nymphas*, and THE CHURCH, WHICH IS IN HIS HOUSE; and, in the second verse of his epistle to Philemon, *to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus, our fellow-soldier*, AND TO THE CHURCH IN THY HOUSE. It has, indeed, been queried what is to be understood by a church in a particular house; whether the assembling of the church, which, in those troublous times, might meet for public worship in it; or a private society of Christians, joining together in the duties of social prayer, and spiritual conversation; or the members of the family uniting in the exercises of domestic devotion. This last inter-

interpretation is adopted by not a few judicious expositors, and seems the most probable. To the honour of the jailor, who was made to exclaim, *What shall I do to be saved?* it is recorded, that he *rejoiced, believing in God with all his house.*

SIXTH, Family worship is one of the means, by which our Father in heaven is pleased to manifest himself to his people.

This consideration endears it to the saints, who, with joy unspeakable, *draw water out of the wells of salvation.* What are the ordinances in general, but meeting-places, as it were, betwixt God and his people? If we wish to find him, we must go into the *Galilees*, where he has appointed to meet with us. Why should we not embrace every opportunity of holding communion with our God? The church tells us, *she sought her beloved, but found him not.* Did she, after the first disappointment, relinquish the pursuit? No. Perseverance was necessary. Not having found her beloved in the streets, and in the broad ways of the city, she applied to the watchmen, saying, *saw ye him whom my soul loveth?* They, it appears, gave her no satisfaction. But, adds she, *It was but a little that I passed from them, but*

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*I found him whom my soul loveth: I held him, and would not let him go, until I had brought him into my mother's house, and into the chambers of her that conceived me.* This plainly teaches that God's people, sometimes, find him in secret and private, after their expectations of meeting with him, in public, have been disappointed. We read of an impotent man, lying at the pool, called *Bethesda*, who had an infirmity thirty and eight years; and, after all, was made whole. Presumption and despondency are dangerous extremes.

SEVENTH, Families are encouraged to worship God from the consideration that many promises are suited to their case.

Has he not promised his gracious presence in *the dwellings of Jacob*, as well as in *the gates of Zion*; though he loves the one more than the other? Our blessed Lord's words have been justly accommodated to the situation of a family beginning to perform social worship, when he says, *If two of you shall agree, as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father, who is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.* How animating is the following promise; which

which has, I suppose, a primary view to the return of the Jews from their Babylonian captivity; but has a running applicability, and a continued accomplishment, especially in the New Testament times! *At the same time saith the Lord, will I be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people.* Says he, in another part of scripture, *In all places, where I record my name, I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee;* and is not his name recorded in our habitations?

FINALLY, The neglect of family religion is awfully threatened in the word of God.

What an alarming imprecation is the prophet's! *Pour out thy fury upon the Heathen that know thee not, AND UPON THE FAMILIES THAT CALL NOT UPON THY NAME.* In scripture the name, *family*, is, I know, ambiguous, and differently understood. But, admitting this, the prophet's words apply, in their full force, to the subject under review. Families, which neglect the worship of Jehovah, and Heathens are properly joined together, for, though the former be *professedly* Christian, they are *practically* Heathen families. Hence they are objects of the  
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divine displeasure. The word, *fury*, bespeaks an awful degree of displeasure, even indignation; the phrase, *pour out*, the tremendous manner in which it is executed. What aggravates their sin, and heightens their misery is their knowledge of their duty, while they do not perform it; for, when it is said, *the Heathen that know thee not*, it evidently implies that those families knew their duty, yet did not worship the God of their fathers. Sinners! stand aghast! Does any hear of the wrath of Almighty God, and his ears not tingle? What! does a family profess to be Christian, in which there is not a vestige of the Christian religion? Tell it not in Gath. Publish it not in Askelon; lest the uncircumcised Philistines triumph.

#### TO CONCLUDE,

FIRST, Does not reason, not to mention revelation, teach the obligation, the importance, and the utility of family religion. Does not reason teach us to repay a generous benefactor with gratitude? Is not a grateful return of Jehovah's mercies all the return we can make for them; all the return he requires? and why not *render him the calves of our lips*?

SECOND,

SECOND, The non-performance of the duties of religion is inconsistent with a gracious state; and they, who neglect them, must unquestionably be in the gall of bitterness, and bond of iniquity. A graceless man *may*, but a gracious person *must* perform these duties; for is not prayer the breath of the new creature? and can we live without breathing? *Behold he*, that is, the new creature, as soon as he begins to live, *prayeth!* Consider also that one of the views, by which our sanctification is described, is by writing the law on the heart. *This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord: I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts; and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people.* Hence, if the divine law be engraved on a man's heart, will he not study to transcribe it in his life, and conversation? If persons be in a gracious state, are not faith in the Redeemer for assistance, and for the acceptance of both their persons, and their services, and love to him, as a Sovereign, as well as a Saviour, powerful principles impelling them to perform these duties, by which they shew their respect for the divine authority. The authority of Jesus commands,  
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his love sweetly constrains us to walk in his ways.

THIRD, Is Joshua's *your* resolution? Be not ashamed, brethren, of being religious; or, if your religion is yet to begin, be persuaded now to leave the path, in which destroyers go. *Come with us*, said Moses to Hobab, *and we will do thee good; for the Lord hath spoken good concerning Israel.* We are accountable creatures; and the day of our death, when we must answer for all the deeds done in the body, is approaching, with rapid, though silent steps. MASTERS! You have a solemn charge of the souls of your servants; such a charge as a minister has of his people. What an eternal disgrace is it to the Christian name for the head of a family to overlook the morals, and religious instruction of any under his roof? What! have not persons, in inferior stations of life, souls to be saved or damned, to be happy or miserable for ever? It matters not whether they be *black*, or *white* men; for, *as men*, the posterity of Ham, are on a perfect equality with other descriptions of the human race. It was Cain, that primeval monument of fratricide! who said, *Am I my brother's keeper?* Nor a few, who now surround

round the celestial throne, have for a ground of thankfulness, and a note, in their ecstatical song, that the God, who saved them, ordered their lot in a pious family, where example, which is, often, more powerful than precept, made a good, a permanent impression on their minds. PARENTS! *Bring up your children in the nurture, and admonition of the Lord.* They are the hope of the church; for families are nurseries, in which young ones are raised up, and prepared for usefulness in public life. Be careful that the stream be not poisoned at the fountain-head. It is easiest to bend the twig when it is green. Impressions made in early life are, with difficulty, if ever eradicated. It is dangerous not to raise up a spiritual seed to the Redeemer. Do you not wish your children to serve him after you have gone to your fathers, and sleep in the dust? A pious education is the best estate you can give them. It has often been remarked by practical writers, on this subject, that both defection and reformation in religion commonly begin *in families*. It is an absurdity to suppose that a parent can be rightly exercised about the interests of his own soul, if he has not the salvation of his children at heart. The Father of mercies does not  
 always

always answer the prayers of pious parents, on behalf of their children, *when* they are presented to him; sometimes not before the parents have gone to the eternal world. Many such prayers, we have reason to believe, lodged at the throne of grace, are yet unanswered; but will be punctually attended to, at the proper time.

UPON THE WHOLE, Had I a thousand mouths, and a thousand tongues, I would employ them in recommending the Redeemer's service to you all; old and young. *Chuse ye, this day, whom ye will serve.* Said Elijah to the people, when the competition was betwixt him and Baal, *if the Lord be God, follow him; but, if Baal, who, when his deluded votaries call upon him, is either deaf or on a journey, follow him.* How honorable, how easy, how delightful is the Redeemer's service! *Wisdom's ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace.* Then give no sleep to your eyes, nor slumber to your eye-lids, until you find a place for the Lord, an habitation for the God of Jacob.

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*Errata to be corrected with the reader's pen.*

Page 7, line 23, for *clat-* read *clat-*.—Page 8, line 16, for *part*, read *best*.—Page 9, line 9, for *Shemei*, read *Shimeï*.