

T H E
AMERICAN PREACHER;

OR, A

COLLECTION OF SERMONS

FROM SOME OF THE

MOST EMINENT PREACHERS,

NOW LIVING,

IN THE UNITED STATES,

OF

DIFFERENT DENOMINATIONS

IN THE

CHRISTIAN CHURCH.

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S E R M O N L I .

TRUST IN GOD.

B Y

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Col. N. C. P.

ISAIAH I. 10.

Who is among you that feareth the Lord, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darknes, and hath no light? let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay upon his God.

IT is said of every real believer, that he walks by faith and not by sight. If this is true, it will follow, that his faith must be exposed to a variety of trials, while he continues in a world of sense. These trials arise from the state of his own mind—from his outward condition—from the state of the world with which he stands connected, and from the mutual influence of all these, one upon another. From this situation it is easy to see, that there are few duties, for the exercise of which, a good man will have greater or more frequent occasion, than that of trust and reliance upon God.

Trust is the duty and the refuge of the needy—of the dependent—of the weak—the timorous, and the distressed. How many are included under one or more of these characters; or rather, who is it that can say he is altogether excluded?

Agreeably to this, we need but open the sacred volume, to perceive how frequent the exhortations are to trust in God, and how many views are given us of his power, wisdom, mercy and faithfulness, to encourage us to an unshaken reliance. At the same time, I am sorry to say, that there are few duties which are more imperfectly understood by many professing Christians. Even pious persons often sin both on the right hand and on the left, that is to say, both by diffidence and presumption. I have, therefore, laid hold of this opportunity, and made choice of this passage of scripture, in order to open and illustrate a little this important duty of a servant of God. How seasonable it is you will easily perceive, for in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper we have set before us Christ Jesus the unspeakable gift of God—the great pledge of his love, and the great foundation of our reliance upon him, not only for his saving mercy in general, but for every necessary blessing in our way to eternal rest.

This passage of scripture is also well suited to the subject. It was spoken to the Jews in a lax and desolate age, when many had turned their backs upon the service of God—had deserted his

ordinances, and despised his servants, which is always an occasion both of affliction and temptation to his own children. This appears from the first words of the chapter. *For thus saith the Lord, where is the bill of your mother's divorcement, whom I have put away? and which of my creditors is it to whom I have sold you? Behold, for your iniquities you have sold yourselves, and for your transgressions is your mother put away.* As also from the 3d and 4th verses. *I clothe the heavens with blackness, and I make sackcloth their covering. The Lord God hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary.*

In discoursing further on this subject, it is proposed, through the assistance of divine grace,

I. To open a little the character and state of those who are called upon and exhorted to trust in the name of the Lord.

II. To explain the duty of trust, and point out the foundation of it.

III. To apply the subject for your instruction and comfort.

In the *first* place then, I am to open a little the character and state of those who are here called upon and exhorted to trust in the name of the Lord.

Their description is as follows; *Who is among you that feareth the Lord, and obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light?*

let him trust in the name of the Lord, and stay himself upon his God. It will help us to enter into the spirit and meaning of the prophet's words, if we keep in view the state of the Jewish church, hinted at a little ago. *Who is among you*; that is, if there is one or more—if there is a small select number in the midst of general corruption and depravity, who have kept their garments unpolluted, though iniquity abounds, and the love of many waxeth cold; *That feareth the Lord?* You know it is common in scripture to describe religion in general by some particular leading branch of it. The fear of God is often made use of for this purpose, as in that passage, there shall be no want to them that *fear him*. It may, therefore, signify those who have a sincere and unfeigned regard to the commandments of God, and have chosen him as their portion and hope. Those who desire and deserve to be distinguished from the profane despiser—the secure formalist, or the disguised hypocrite. Those, in a word, who are, and who desire to appear, to use the strong language of scripture, upon the Lord's side in every struggle, and who resolve with Joshua, that whatever others do, for their part they will serve the Lord.

But I cannot help thinking, we may also, with great safety, explain the words in a closer and stricter sense, and suppose, that by fearing the Lord is to be understood a due reverence for his infinite majesty, a humble veneration for his sacred author-

ity. This is a most excellent fence or guard to the conscience in an evil time, and a noble preservative from the spreading infection and insinuating poison of prevailing or fashionable sins. It is also the usual character of a desolute age to have cast off fear, to treat the most sacred things with scorn, and to look upon that holy solicitude to avoid sin, which appears in the carriage and language of a child of God, as a mark of meanness or weakness of mind. In such an age, one who fears God is well described by the prophet Isaiah. *But to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.*

The next part of the character is, *and obeyeth the voice of his servant*; that, is to say, is willing to hearken to the message of God by the mouth of his servants. The words of the text, no doubt, may be considered as primarily referring to the inspired prophets, who bore an immediate commission, miraculously attested from God. Many, even of these, were set at nought, their message derided, and their persons insulted, when they attempted to stem the tide of prevailing vice, or boldly denounced the divine vengeance against high-handed sinners. But the sincerely pious obeyed their voice. I shall make no scruple to apply this to ourselves, and the present age. Our blessed Redeemer hath established in his church a standing ministry, and the regular administration of ordinances. And though we have this treasure

in earthen vessels, yet in no other way doth he now communicate his will, and vouchsafe his presence to his people, but by the reading and hearing of his word, and attendance upon his instituted worship. It will, no doubt, therefore be a part of the character of a good man, that he will love the ordinances, and obey the voice of the servants of God, that he will consider him who hath sent them, and receive instruction, not as the word of man, but as it is in deed and in truth the word of God.

On the other hand, when iniquity prevails, when irreligion and profaneness lift up their heads, one of the most usual concomitants, and one of the surest proofs of it is, a neglect of ordinances, and contempt of those who are concerned in their administration: How far this is at present the case, I leave to yourselves to judge. While I speak this, my brethren, I do by no means desire to see an ignorant people distracted by the gloomy terrors of superstition, or led blindfold by the enchanted cord of implicit faith. But sure I am, there is an extreme on either hand, and those who truly fear the Lord, will honor the persons, and obey the voice of such as plead his cause and speak in his name. You may rest assured, that though they neither deserve nor claim any authority on their own account, yet so long as they stand in the divine councils, and speak the divine word, their message will be attended with this awful sanction, *He that despiseth*

you despiseth me, and he that despiseth me despiseth him that sent me.

The last part of the character here drawn, which lays the foundation for the subsequent direction is, *that walketh in darkness and hath no light*. Darkness and light, besides their literal, have often a metaphorical sense in scripture. They are, indeed, used with a good deal of latitude and variety. But I think their metaphorical signification may be reduced to these two general heads. 1. Sometimes light signifies knowledge, and darkness signifies ignorance—as in Eph. v. 8. *Ye are sometimes darkness but now are ye light in the Lord, walk as children of light*. Acts xxvi. 18. *To turn them from darkness unto light, and from the power of Satan unto God*. Job xxxvii. 19. *Teach us what we shall say unto him, for we cannot order our speech by reason of darkness*. 2. Sometimes darkness signifies distress or trouble, and the correspondent signification of light is deliverance and joy, as 2 Sam. xxii. 28, 29. *And the afflicted people thou wilt save, but thine eyes are upon the haughty that thou mayest bring them down, for thou art my lamp, O Lord, and the Lord will lighten my darkness*. Job xix. 8. *He hath fenced up my way that I cannot pass; he hath put darkness in my paths*. Ps. xcvii. 11. *Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart*. Esther viii. 16. *And the Jews had light and gladness, and joy and honor*.

None of these senses is to be excluded in the passage before us. Believers may walk in darkness

when ignorant or uncertain as to what nearly concerns them, as well as under distress and trouble. They have also a mutual influence upon, produce, and are produced by one another. For illustrating this a little more particularly, observe, that a good man may walk in darkness. 1. When he is in doubt or uncertainty as to his interest in the divine favor. 2. When he is under the pressure of outward calamity. 3. When the state of the church is such, that he cannot understand or explain, in a satisfying manner, the course of divine providence. These particulars I have it not in view to enlarge much upon, but only to explain them so far as is necessary to lay a foundation for what shall be afterwards offered on the duty to trust in God.

1. Then, a good man may walk in darkness when he is in doubt or uncertainty as to his interest in the divine favor. I apprehend that some measure of hope in God's mercy is essential to true piety, and not only the right, but the possession of every child of God. Faith and despair are beyond all question inconsistent. Faith and hope are inseparable. Yet certainly the excellent ones of the earth may be sometimes involved in great perplexity and doubt. This is plain from scripture examples, from daily experience, and from the nature and reason of the thing. How violent a struggle do we often find the Psalmist David in, between hope and fear? *O my God, my soul is cast down in me; therefore will I remember thee from the*

land of Jordan, and of the Hermonites, from the hill Mizar. How many do we see every day under a spirit of bondage, who, though they still cleave to God as their portion, yet are often full of fears, and seldom dare confidently affirm their interest in, or relation to him. And indeed how can it be otherwise? While we are here, our sanctification is but imperfect; and alas! with regard to many, it is often hard to determine, whether we should not write upon it, *mene tekel*, as essentially defective.

Sin separates between God and his people, and causes him to hide his face from them. Nay, sometimes, though there be no particular, or provoking crime as the cause of his controversy with them, he may withdraw from them the light of his countenance to exercise their vigilance, or to try their patience. I know, my brethren, that the distress of serious souls, when mourning after an absent or an angry God, crying to him in secret, and following hard after him in his ordinances, is by many treated with the highest degree of contempt. But surely, if peace of mind from a well-founded hope of the divine favor, is the greatest of all present blessings: And if this, from the variable-ness of our own conduct, is sometimes more, sometimes less strong, and sometimes wholly suspended; when this last is the case, it must occasion inexpressible concern, and there can be no greater evidence of irreligion and impiety than to call it in question.

2. A good man may walk in darkness when under the pressure of outward calamity. This, in a real believer, is never wholly separated from the former. Even in itself, indeed, no affliction for the present is joyous but grievous. The disorders of this feeble frame, poverty and straitness of provision, unjust slander and reproach, must be deeply and sensibly felt by every good man, even as he is a man. To this may be added, the loss of relations, and concerns for the sufferings of others of every kind, which is always most distressing to the best and tenderest spirits. But outward calamities by those that fear God, are felt most sensibly when they are considered as the rod of his anger, and bring sin to remembrance. When he visits his own children with any of his sore judgments: When he follows them with breach upon breach, they are ready to say, *Surely he is setting me up as a mark for his arrows, he is counting me his enemy.*— They are often at a loss to understand the cause of his controversy with them; and they also find it often extremely difficult to bring their minds to a patient and submissive resignation to his holy will. To those who know their duty, and desire through divine grace to comply with it, it is no small difficulty to be obliged to struggle with a rising and rebellious heart within, as well as suffering from without, and to be alternately calling in question, the certainty either of the love of God to them, or of their love to him.

3. A good man may sometimes walk in darkness from the aspect of Providence, and the state of the Redeemer's kingdom. The works of God are fought out of them who have pleasure in them. But when they are not able to penetrate the depths of the divine counsels, this becomes often a source both of distress and temptation. When wicked men are suffered to prosper at their will—when the good are oppressed by the power and tyranny, or persecuted by the malice of their enemies—when the most generous attempts for the revival of truth and righteousness are rendered abortive—when the professing servants of God are divided into parties, or marshalled under names, and their zeal made to spend itself in unnecessary, sinful and hurtful contentions—when offences come, and those of the highest profession or attainments are suffered to fall into gross crimes, by which the mouths of enemies are opened to blasphemy; then may, and must we adopt the words of the Psalmist—Ps. lxxiii. 10—14. *Therefore, his people return hither; and waters of a full cup are wrung out unto them: And they say, how doth God know? and is there knowledge in the most High? Behold, these are the ungodly who prosper in the world; they increase in riches. Verily, I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency. For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning.*

I proceed now to the *second* and chief thing proposed from this passage, which was to explain the

duty of trust in God, and to point out its foundation.

Trust, in the most general view we can take of it, may be thus explained. It is a reliance or confidence in God, that however discouraging appearances may be for the present time, yet, by his power and wisdom, our desires and expectation shall take place, whether as to deliverance from trouble, or the obtaining of future blessings. When we can attain this happy frame of spirit, it is an inconceivable relief and ease to the mind under suffering, and is excellently expressed by the Psalmist—*Pf. lv. 22. Cast thy burden upon the Lord, and he shall sustain thee, he shall never suffer the righteous to be moved.* Let us then endeavor to explain the grounds of this as distinctly as possible. And God grant that it may be done not only in a clear, but in a solid and satisfying manner, so as to assist you in the practice of real and vital religion.

I have already said, that our expectation is from the power and wisdom of God. May we, then, reasonably expect, is it our duty to believe, that we shall receive all that we desire, and that is within the reach of divine power and wisdom? These have no bounds at all. We know that nothing is too hard for the Almighty. He doth according to his will in the armies of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. This suggests to us that there is something more necessary, in order to lay a proper foundation for trust, viz. his goodness to

make our expectation probable, and his promise to make it certain. Even created beings can often do what they will not. This holds particularly with regard to God, whose power is directed in its exercise by his goodness, and limited by his wisdom. His goodness, in general, encourages us to go to him with a peradventure, or who can tell whether he may not be gracious? But in order to make our trust both distinct and strong, we must go to his promise *for he is faithful and keepeth covenant and truth for ever.* Trust then, my brethren, rests ultimately on the promise. It must be precisely commensurate, or of the same extent with the promises. Whoever doubts or calls in question the certainty of what God hath promised, is chargeable with distrust; and whoever expects to receive, in kind or degree, more than he has promised, is so far guilty of presumption. This is the general rule, and I think it carries such evidence with it, that every one must be sensible it is just, who hath heard it with any measure of attention.

But the great difficulty yet remains, which is, to apply this rule to the various cares that occur in the spiritual life, and to tell any particular person what it is his duty firmly to believe, and hope he shall receive from God, and what it would be presumptuous and simple in him to fix his expectation on. This is plainly of the greater importance, that the more particular our trust is, as to the object of desire, it is the more powerful a support to the mind. At the same time it frequently hap-

pens, that the more particularly our desires are formed, the foundation of our hope appears the more uncertain and questionable. On this account you may observe, that it is of the greatest moment to understand the nature and tenor of the promises; or rather, indeed, to explain the foundation of trust, and to explain the nature and tenor of the promises is one and the same thing.

For this end, it may be proper to distinguish the promises of God, as to futurity, into two heads, *absolute* and *conditional*. By absolute promises, in this place, I understand only those that are so in the most unlimited sense, that is to say, revealed as a part of the fixed plan of Providence, suspended on no terms but what all, of every character, may expect will certainly come to pass. Such are the promises after the flood, *that summer and winter, seed time and harvest should not fail*—the coming of Christ in the flesh at the fulness of time, to the ancient Patriarchs, and to us—*the downfall of Antichrist*—the preservation of a church on earth, let its enemies be or do what they will—*the calling of God's antient people, the Jews, and the coming of Christ to judge the world at the last day*. These are all called promises in scripture, and so far as they can be of any use to the people of God, either for direction in duty, or restraint from sin, or consolation under trial, they are to be depended on, in the most absolute manner, for they rest upon the certainty of the holy scriptures, and the truth of the unchangeable God, who *is not a man that he should lie, nor the son of man that he should repent*.