

S E R M O N VI.

HOW TO BEAR AFFLICTIONS.

HEBREWS XII. 5.

My son despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him.

Secondly. **I** SHALL proceed to prove, it is the best wisdom not to despise God's chastenings, nor faint under them. I will not insist upon the consideration that it is the counsel of the supreme wisdom to us, nor that it is the avoiding the vicious extremes, which is the chiefest point of moral prudence : but it is the only way to prevent the greatest mischiefs that will otherwise befall us. It is said, he that is wise is profitable to himself, that is either in obtaining good, or preventing evils. Now it will appear how pernicious those extremes are, by considering ; Job. 22. 21.

1. The contempt of chastenings, deprives us of all those benefits which were intended by them. God's end in them is to imbitter sin to our taste, and make us disrelish that deadly poison :

for as, according to the rules of physic, contraries are cured by contraries; so sin that prevails by pleasure, by something delightful to the carnal part, is mortified by what is afflictive to sense. Repentance is a duty that best complies with affliction: for when the spirit is made sad, and brought to the sobriety of consideration, it will more readily reflect upon the true causes of troubles: when the springs overflow, it is but directing the stream into a right channel, the changing the object of our grief, viz. mourning for sin instead of sorrowing for outward trouble, and we are in the way to happiness. Sensible sorrow leads to godly sorrow. The natural is first, then the spiritual. Now the despisers of God's hand, that are unaffected with judgments, are incapable of this benefit. For if they do not feel the blow, how shall they take notice of the hand that strikes? If they are not softened with sorrows, how shall they receive the divine impression? If they have no sense of his displeasure, how shall they fear to offend him for the future? If the medicine doth not work, how can it expel noxious humours?

2. The neglect of chastenings doth not only render them unprofitable, but exposes to greater evils.

(1.) It provokes God to withdraw his judgments for a time. This the sinner desired, and thinks himself happy that he is at ease: miserable delusion! This respite is the presage of his final ruin. It was the desperate state of Judah, as God expresses it, "why should ye be stricken any more? Ye will revolt more and more." Isa. 1. 5. The words of an anxious father that has tried all methods, counsel, kindness, corrections to reclaim a rebellious obstinate son; and finding no answerable effect, gives him over to follow the pernicious swing of his corrupt desires. No severity is like the suffering him in his licentious courses. Thus when God hath used many gracious ways to reduce the sinner, by his word, spirit and judgments, but he is inflexible to the calls of the word, impenetrable to the motions of the spirit, and insensible of afflicting providences; when after a combat with the rod, sin comes off unwounded, and the rod retires; this calm is more dreadful than the fiercest storm; nothing can be more fatal to the sinner, for by this divine desertion he is given over to a reprobate mind, and vile affections; he goes on undisturbed in his sins, and every day increaseth his enmity against God, and provokes God's enmity against him. It is not concei-

viable that one who is not made pliable to the grace of God by afflictions, should submit when he is in pleasant circumstances, and disposed to enjoy sensual satisfactions. If the whip and spur cannot break and tame the unruly beast, certainly the rich pasture will never make him manageable. So that God's ceasing to punish the sinner at present is so far from being a favour, that it is the effect of his deepest displeasure ; for it contributes to his hardening. It was the case of Pharaoh, when any of the plagues were removed : indulgence occasioned his induration. As water taken from the fire, freezes sooner and harder, than if the thinner parts had never been evaporated by the former heat ; so when men are taken off from the fire of affliction, they are more confirmed in their vicious courses than if they had never been afflicted.

(2.) The slighting of lighter strokes, provokes God sometimes to bring more dreadful judgments in this life upon sinners. No man can endure that his love or anger should be despised. Nebuchadnezzar commanded the furnace to be heated seven times hotter for those who contemned his threatenings. God tells the Israelites, " if ye will not be reformed by these things, but will walk contrary unto me ; then will I also walk contrary unto you, and will punish you yet seven times for your sins." Levit. 26. 23, 24. He will change the rods into scorpions, and will scourge them for their continued rebellions. It is the intent of that expostulation, " shall one take up a snare from the earth, and have taken nothing at all ?" Amos 3. 5. Shall God remove his judgments while sinners are careless and unreformed, as if they might be final conquerors over them ? No, he will multiply and greaten them. It may be at first God blasts part of the estate, and the sinner is not apprehensive of his hand ; then he comes nearer and snatches away a dear relation : if still the sinner is unaffected, he strikes his body with a lingering, or acute disease : if still he be not concerned for God's displeasure, he wounds his spirit, makes him sick in sense and conscience at the same time, fills him with terror by the reflection upon his wicked ways, and the foresight of that dreadful tribunal before which he must appear ; so that although he cannot live, he dares not die ; though his earthly tabernacle be ready to fall upon him, he is afraid to go out and meet the Supreme Judge : and if this doth not work a sincere thorough change, God casts him into hell to the company

of the giants, those bold rebels that fought against God. Prov. 21. 16. Briefly, as under the law, an incorrigible son that neglected his father's reproofs, was to die without mercy; * so an unreformed sinner who kicks against the pricks, and refuses to submit to God's corrections, shall be cut off in his obstinacy; justice will proceed to excision, and acts of vengeance against him.

(3.) Fainting under chastenings is pernicious to sufferers: for it renders them utterly indisposed for the performance of duty, and incapable of receiving the comforts proper for an afflicted state.

1st. It renders them utterly indisposed for the performance of duty. Hope draws forth all the active powers of the soul; it is the great motive to diligence, and instrument of duty. Despair, like extremity of cold that checks the spring, and binds up the earth that its fruits cannot appear, hinders the free exercise of reason and grace, and cuts the sinews of obedience. He that is hopeless of a good issue out of troubles, will neither repent, nor pray, nor reform, but indulges barren tears instead of real duties.

Besides, it often falls out, that the same affliction is sent from God's displeasure upon his people for their sins, and is the effect of the rage of men against them upon the account of their professing his name. Such is the wisdom and goodness of God, that by the same fiery trial he may refine his servants from their dross and impurities, and render the glory of the gospel more conspicuous. The hatred of religion, and a blind fury may transport men to acts of cruelty against the saints; but it is by the permission of the universal sovereign, who hath the hearts of all in his hands, and suffers their rage for holy ends. The enemy designs against their faith, but God's aim is to make them reform their lives.

Now if either through strong fears, or the stinging sense of troubles upon the account of religion, our courage fails, we are presently in danger of falling away, and denying our master. The faint-hearted person is usually false-hearted, and for want of resolution, being frightened out of his conscience and duty, chooses sin rather than suffering, and thereby justly deprives

* Vid. Mr. Mede in loc.

himself "of the crown of life," that is promised only to "those who are faithful unto the death." Besides, not only the loss of heaven, but the torments of hell are threatened against those who withdraw from the service of God to avoid temporal evils. The "fearful and unbelieving are in the front of those that shall have part in the lake of fire and brimstone, which is the second death." Rev. 21. 8. Now what folly is it when two evils are propounded, to choose the greatest; that is, eternal death rather than temporal: and of two goods to prefer the less; a short life with its conveniencies on earth, before that which is eternally glorious in heaven? By which it appears how much it concerns us to fortify and fix our minds by a steadfast belief of God's supporting presence with us in all troubles, and of his gracious promise, that in due time we shall reap if we faint not in well-doing.

2dly. They are incapable of the comforts proper to an afflicted state. Those arise from the belief, "that God loves whom he chastens:" Rev. 3. for the least sin is a greater evil than the greatest trouble; and his design is to take that away, and from the expectation of a happy issue. Hope is the anchor within the veil, that in the midst of storms and roughest seas, preserves from shipwreck. The character of christians is, that they "are rejoicing in hope:" Rom. 12. 12. but when the afflicted are under fearful impressions that God is an irreconcilable enemy; and sadly conclude their miseries are past redress, those divine comforts that are able to sweeten the most bitter sufferings to believers, are of no efficacy. Their deep sorrows are not like the pains of a travailing woman that end in a joyful birth, but the killing tortures of the stone that are fruitless to the patient. An obstinate grief, and rejecting the consolations of God, "is the beginning of sorrows," the first payment of that sad arrear of mourning that shall be exacted in another world.

IV. The use shall be to excite us to those duties that are directly contrary to the extremes forbidden, viz. To demean ourselves under the chastenings of the Lord with a deep reverence and humble fear of his displeasure, and with a firm hope and dependance upon him for a blessed issue upon our complying with his holy will.

I. With an humble reverence of his hand. This temper is absolutely necessary and most congruous with respect to God, upon the account of his sovereignty, justice and goodness declared in

his chastenings; and with respect to our frailty, our dependance upon him, our obnoxiousness to his law, and our obligations to him, that he will please to afflict us for our good.

This is the reason of that expostulation, "Will a lion roar in the forest, when he hath no prey?" Amos 3. 4. Shall God's threatenings and judgments have no effect? "Who ever hardened himself against him, and prospered? Do we provoke the Lord to jealousy," the most sensible and severe attribute when it is incensed? "Are we stronger than he?" Can we encounter offended omnipotency? Can we with an army of lusts oppose myriads of mighty angels? It is not courage, but such a prodigious degree of folly and fury, that one would think it were impossible a reasonable creature were capable of it. Yet every sinner unreformed by afflictions is thus desperate: "he stretches out his hand against God, and strengthens himself against the Almighty; he runneth upon him, even on his neck, upon the thick bosses of his bucklers." Job 15. 25. 26. Such a furious rebel was Ahaz, who "in the time of his distress, did trespass more against the Lord: this is that king Ahaz!" 2 Chron. 28. But God hath most solemnly declared, that he will be victorious at last over the most fierce and obdurate enemies. "As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me." His power is infinite, and anger puts an edge upon his power, and makes it more terrible. If our subjection be not voluntary, it must be violent. It is our wisdom to prevent acts of vengeance by humble submissions. The duty of the afflicted is excellently expressed by Elihu: "Surely it is meet to be said to God, I have borne chastisements, I will not offend any more. That I know not, teach thou me: if I have done iniquity, I will do so no more." Job. 34. 31, 32.

Add further, upon another account reverence is due to God's chastenings: for when love is the motive that incites one to give us counsel, though it be mixed with reproofs, and his prudence is not great, yet a respect is due to the affection. Now God who is only wise, chastises men from a desire to make them better and happy; he intends primarily to refine, not to consume them by afflictions: so that a serious regard to his hand is the most just and necessary duty of the creature. Briefly, every chastisement should leave deep and permanent impressions upon us; the sense of God's displeasure should make our hearts

mournful and mollified, broken and contrite, that his will may be done by us on earth as it is in heaven.

2. Let us always preserve an humble dependance and firm hope on God, for a blessed issue out of all our troubles: the support and tranquillity of the soul ariseth from hence. Christian patience suffers all things as well as charity, being encouraged by a continual expectation of good from him. Patience confirms all other graces, and is to the whole armour of God, what the temper is to material weapons, that keeps them from breaking in the combat. Now to maintain a constant hope in affliction, it is necessary to consider the reason of the exhortation as it is admirably amplified by the apostle.

(1.) The relation God sustains when he afflicts believers. He is a judge invested with the quality of a father. The covenant of grace between God and Jesus Christ, our true David, contains this observable clause, "If thy children forsake my law, and walk not in my judgments, if they break my statutes, and keep not my commandments; then will I visit their transgressions with a rod, and their iniquity with stripes." Psal. 89. 30, 31, 32.

The love that ariseth from this relation, though it cannot hate, yet it may be displeased, and chastise them for their follies. Moses tells the Israelites, "Thou shalt consider in thy heart, that as a man chastens his son, so the Lord thy God chastens thee." Deut. 8. 5. In children reason is not fully disclosed, they are not capable to govern themselves, and are only taught with sensible pleasure or pain? So that a father is obliged to join correction with instruction, to form them to virtue. This is so far from being inconsistent with paternal affection, that it is inseparable from it. For a parent to suffer a child to go on pleasantly in sin without due punishment, is pure cruelty disguised under the mask of pity: for by the neglect of discipline he is confirmed in his vicious courses, and exposed to ruin. The apostle therefore adds, "whom the Lord loves, he chastens:" as from the severest wrath he sometimes forbeareth to strike, so from dearest love he afflicts. Humble believers through a cloud of tears may see the light of God's countenance: for having elected them by special love to a glorious inheritance above, he dispenseth all things here in order to the preparing them for it; and all temporal evils, as means, are transformed

into the nature of the end to which they are subservient. So that the sharpest sufferings are really from God's favour, since they are beneficial for our obtaining real happiness. The devil usually tempts men in a paradise of delights, to precipitate them into hell: God tries them in the furnace of afflictions, to purify and prepare them for heaven.

(2.) It is a strong cordial against fainting, to consider that by virtue of the paternal relation "he scourges every son whom he receives:" for no troubles are more afflictive and stinging than those that are unexpected. Now when we are assured that there is no son whom the heavenly Father doth not chasten, we are less surprised when we meet with crosses. Indeed there is hardly any kind of affliction that may befall us, but we have some instance in scripture of the saints suffering the same. Are we poor and mean in the world? we should consider that poverty with holiness is a divine complexion: Jesus Christ the holy and beloved Son of God, had not where to lay his head. Are we under bodily distempers? good Hezekiah was struck with an uncomfortable disease as to the quality of it; and Gaius had a flourishing soul in a languishing body. Are our dear relations taken away? Aaron and David lost some of their sons by terrible strokes. Are our spirits wounded with the sense of God's displeasure? Job and Heman were under strong terrors, yet the favourites of heaven. Briefly, how many most dear to God were called forth to extreme and bloody trials for defence of the truth? How many deaths did they endure in one torment? How many torments in one death? yet they were so far from fainting, that the more their pains were exasperated, the more their courage and joy was shining and conspicuous; as the face of the heavens is never more serene and clear, than when the sharpest north wind blows. It is the apostle's inference, "Seeing we are compassed with such a cloud of witnesses, let us run with patience the race that is set before us."

This is further enforced by the following words, "if ye be without chastening, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons." Ver. 8. If God doth not vouchsafe us the mercy of his rod, it is evident we are not part of his fatherly care. The bramble is neglected, while the vine is cut till it bleeds. It is a miserable privilege to be exempted from divine discipline, and by ease and prosperity to be corrupted and made

fit for destruction. St. Austin represents one *postulating with God*: *O Deus, ista est justitia tua, ut mali florent, & boni laborent!* in Psal. 25. O God, it is righteous with thee, that the wicked should prosper, and the good suffer! *Dicis Deo, ista est justitia tua?* & *Deus tibi, ista est fides tua?* *hæc enim tibi promisi?* *ad hoc christianus factus es, ut in seculo isto floureres, & in inferno postea torquereris?* God replies to him, Is this your faith? Did I promise you temporal prosperity? Were you a christian for this, that you might flourish in this world, and be miserably tormented in hell?

The apostle represents the special prerogative of God "as the Father of Spirits," ver. 9. and so hath a nearer claim to us than the fathers of our flesh, and that he is not liable to those imperfections that attend the earthly relations. "They for a few days chastened us for their own pleasure." Human love is a troubled irregular passion, mixed with ignorance, and prone to error in the excess or defect. Sometimes parents are indulgent, and by a cruel compassion spare their children when they are faulty: sometimes they correct without cause, sometimes when the reason is just, yet they err in the manner or measure of the correction, so that their children are discouraged. But in God there is a perfect union of wisdom and love, of discretion and tenderness; his affection is without the least imperfection. His will is always guided by infinite wisdom. If his children offend, he will chastise them with the rod of men, 2 Sam. 7. 14. that is, moderately; for as in scripture things are magnified by the epithet, divine or of God, so they are lessened by the epithet, human. Accordingly the apostle declares to the Corinthians, that "no temptation had befallen them, but such as is common to men: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that you are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." 1 Cor. 10. 13. As a prudent physician consults the strength of the patient as well as the quality of the disease, and proportions his medicine; so all the bitter ingredients, their mixture and measure, are dispensed by the wise prescription of God, according to the degrees of strength that are in his people.

The apostle specifies the immediate end of God in his chastenings: "but he for profit, that we may be partakers of his holiness." This is the supreme excellency of the divine nature, and

our conformity to it is so valuable, that it renders afflictions not only tolerable, but so far desirable as they contribute to it. In the present state our graces are imperfect, and our conformity to the divine purity is like the resemblance of the sun in a watery cloud, very much beneath the perfection and radiancy of that great light. Now God is pleased to fashion us according to his image by afflictions. As a statue is cut by the artificer, to bring it into a beautiful form.

He is pleased to bring us into divers temptations to try our faith, to work in us patience, to inflame our prayers, to mortify our carnal desires, to break those voluntary bonds whereby we are fettered to the earth, that we may live with those affections wherewith others die. And certainly if we make a true judgment of things, we have not the least cause to suspect the love of God when he chastises us, to take away sin the only abominable object of his hatred and deep detestation, and to render us partakers of the divine nature. "And the present peaceable fruit of righteousness is the product in those who are duly exercised by their troubles." It is an allusion to the reward of the conquerors in the Olympic games, who had a crown of olives, the emblem and shadow of peace. But true peace, a divine calm in the conscience, shall be the recompence of all that exercise their graces suitable to an afflicted state. In short, the apostle assures believers, that they are "chastened of the Lord, to prevent their condemnation with the world." 1 Cor. 11. 32. The correcting rod delivers them from hell. This consideration changes thorns into roses, and extracts honey out of wormwood; if the way be stony or showery that leads to blessedness, a christian should willingly walk in it. To conclude; from the consideration of what the scripture declares concerning temporal evils, let us "lift up the hands that hang down, and the feeble knees; and make straight paths for our feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed:" i. e. in our affliction, let us take courage and resolution from the promises, and live in a holy conformity to God's will, that the weak or faint may be restored.

The first and last lesson of Pagan philosophy was to support men under the storms to which they are liable in this open state, to render the soul *velut pelagi rupes immota*, as a rock unshaken by the waves.

But all their directions were unsuccessful, and so could not secure them from impatience or despair. But the gospel that assures us of the love of God in sending afflictions for our spiritual and eternal good, is alone able to compose the mind. And whenever we faint in troubles, it is either from infidelity or inconsideration ; it is impossible a person should be a christian, and be incapable of comfort in the most afflicted state : for we are really so by the Holy Spirit, who is the comforter. When we speak sometimes to those we judge infirm, we speak to infidels, who only receive remedy from time which they ought to receive from faith ; they have the name of God only in their mouths, but the world is in their hearts. Their passions are strong and obstinate, not subject to sanctified reason. The difficulty they have of being comforted, discovers the necessity of their being afflicted. They need conversion more than consolation ; others, who are sincere in faith, yet are apt to faint under troubles, from an error like that of the apostles ; when their Lord came upon the waters in a stormy tempestuous night to their assistance, they thought he was a spirit. So they look on God as an enemy, when he comes to sanctify and save them : the sovereign remedy of our sorrows is to correct the judgment of sense by a serious belief of God's promise. Thus we shall reconcile the roughness of his hand with the sweetness of his voice : he calls to us from heaven in the darkest night, " It is I, be not afraid." He corrects us with the heart and hand of a father.

A due consideration of these things will produce a glorified joy in the midst of our sufferings. " Whatsoever things were written aforetime, were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope." Rom. 15. 4.