

Sermon V.

Psal. lxxiii. 28.—“But it is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all thy works.”

After man's first transgression, he was shut out from the tree of life, and cast out of the garden, by which was signified his seclusion and sequestration from the presence of God, and communion with him: and this was in a manner the extermination of all mankind in one, when Adam was driven out of paradise. Now, this had been an eternal separation for any thing that we could do, (for we can do nothing but depart by a perpetual backsliding, and make the distance every day wider,) except it had pleased the Lord, of his infinite grace, to condescend to draw near to us in gracious promises and offers of a Redeemer. If he had not made the first journey from heaven to earth, by sending his only Son, we should have given over the hope of returning from earth to heaven. But he hath taken away the greatest part of that distance, in drawing near to our nature; yea, in assuming our flesh into the fellowship of his glorious divinity. He hath stooped so low to meet with us, and offered himself the trysting place²⁷⁴ between God and us, a fit meeting-place, where there is a conjunction of the interests of both parties, and now, there is no more to do, but to draw near to God in Jesus Christ, since he hath made the great journey to come down to us. We have not that infinite gulf of satisfaction to justice to pass over, we have not the height of divine Majesty, as he is infinitely above us, and offended with us, to climb up unto. Certainly we could not but fall into the lake that is below us, if we were to aim so high. But the Lord hath been pleased to descend to us, in our mean capacity in the flesh, and fill up the immeasurable gulf

[382]

²⁷⁴ [See note, page 126.—*Ed.*]

of justice by the infinite merits and sufferings of his Son in our flesh. And now he invites us, he requests us, to come to him in his Son and have life. We are not come to mount Sinai, that might not be touched, that burnt with fire and tempest, where there were terrible sights and intolerable noises. I say, such a God we might have had to do with a consuming fire, instead of an instructing light,—a devouring fire, instead of a healing Sun of righteousness, considering that there is nothing in us which is not fit and prepared fuel for everlasting burnings. But we are come—and that is the eternal wonder of angels—unto mount Sion to be citizens in the city of God and fellow citizens with blessed angels and glorified spirits, to peace and reconciliation with him who was our judge. And if you ask how this may be? I answer, because we have one Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant, to come to, whose blood crieth louder for pardon of sinners than all men's transgressions can cry for punishment of sinners, Heb. xii. 18-20, &c.

Let us then consider the first step and degree of union with God,—it consists in faith in Jesus Christ. This is the first motion of the soul in drawing near to God, for, as there is no remission without blood, so no access to God without a mediator. For if you consider what is in Jesus Christ, you will find that which will engage the desire of the heart, as also that which will give boldness and confidence to act that desire. Eternal life is promised and proposed in him,—he offers rest to weary souls, and hath it to give. That which we ignorantly and vainly seek elsewhere, here it is to be found. For personal excellencies, he is the chief infinitely beyond comparison, and for suitableness to us and our necessities, all the gospel is an expression of it, so that he is presented in the most attractive drawing manner that can be imagined. And then, when the desires are inflamed, yet if there be no oil of hope to feed it, it will soon cool again. Therefore, take a view again, and you may have boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus. There was some kind of distance

kept in the Old Testament,—none but the high priest might enter into the holiest place, but the entry of our High Priest into it, that is, into heaven, hath made it patent to all that come to him and apply his blood. There is a new and living way by the holy flesh of Christ, consecrated and made, of infinite value and use, by the divinity of his person, and, therefore, having such a one of our kindred so great with God, we may draw near with a true heart and full assurance of faith, having our consciences sprinkled, &c, Heb. x. 18-20, &c. Now, since the way is made plain to you, and the entry is opened up in the gospel, do you not find your hearts stir within you to draw near to him? Do you not find a necessity of making peace by such a Mediator? O that ye knew the great distance between God and your natures, and what the hazard is, “Lo! they that are far from thee shall perish,” then certainly you would take hold of this invitation, and be easily drawn unto Jesus Christ. But unto you who have adventured to draw near for pardon of sin in Christ, I would recommend unto you that you would draw yet nearer to God. After that the partition wall of wrath and condemnation is removed, yet there is much darkness in your minds and corruption in your natures, that separates from him, I mean, intercepts and disturbs that blessed communion you are called unto. Therefore, I would exhort you, as James, “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you,” chap. iv. 8, and that, wherein this most consists, is in studying that purification of our natures, that cleansing of our hearts from guile, and our hands from offences, by which our souls may draw towards a resemblance of God. This access and drawing near to God in assimilation and conformity of nature is the great design of the gospel. “Be ye holy, for I am holy. Now, ye are agreed, walk with him,” (Amos iii. 3), as Enoch “walked with God,” Gen. v. 24, that is, labour in all your conversation to set him before your eyes, and to study to be well pleased with him in all things and to please him in all, to conform yourselves to his pleasure in every thing. And this communion in walking especially consists in that

[383]

communication of the spirit with God in prayer, this is the nearest and sweetest approach when the soul is lifted up to God, and is almost out of itself in him, and this being the ordinary exercise and motion of the soul, it exceedingly advances in the first point of nearness, that is, in conformity with God. Drawing often near in communion with him in prayer, makes the soul draw towards his likeness, even as much converse of men together will make them like one another.

Now, for the commendation of this, "It is good." What greater evil can be imagined than separation from the greatest good? And what greater good, than accession to the greatest good? Every thing is in so far happy and well, as it is joined with, and enjoyeth, that which is convenient for it. Light is the perfection of the earth, remove it, and what a disconsolate and unpleasant thing is it! Now, truly there is nothing suitable to the immortal spirit of man but God, and, therefore, all its happiness or misery must be measured by the access or recess, nearness or distance, of that infinite goodness. Therefore, is it any wonder, that all they that go a whoring from him perish, as every man's heart doth? For we are infinitely bound by creation, by many other bonds stronger than wedlock, to consecrate and devote ourselves wholly to God, but this is treacherously broken. Every man turns aside to vanity and lies, and is guilty of heart whoredom from God, and spiritual idolatry, because the affection that should be preserved chaste for him is prostitute to every base object. So then, this divorcement of the soul from God cannot but follow thereupon, even an eternal eclipse of true and real life and comfort. And whoever draws back from the fountain of life and salvation, cannot but find elsewhere perdition and destruction, Heb. x. ult. My beloved, let us set thus aside all other things which are the pursuits and endeavours of the most part of men. Men's natural desires are carried towards health, food, raiment, life and liberty, peace, and such like, but the more rational sort of men seek after some shadow of wisdom and virtue. Yet the

generality of men, both high and low, have extravagant illimited desires towards riches, pleasure, preferment, and all that we have spoken is enclosed within the narrow compass of men's abode here, which is but for a moment. So that, if it were possible that all these forementioned desires and delights of men could attend any man for the space of an hundred years, though he had the concurrence of the streams of the creatures to bring him in satisfaction, though all the world should bow to him and be subject to the beck of his authority without stroke of sword, though all the creatures should spend their strength and wit upon his satisfaction, yet do but consider what that shall be within some few years, when he shall be spoiled of all that attendance, denuded of all external comforts, when the fatal period must close his life, peace, health, and all, and his poor soul also, that was drowned in that gulf of pleasure, shall then find itself robbed of its precious treasure, that is, God's favour, and so remain in everlasting banishment from his presence. Do ye think, I say that man were happy? Nay! O happy Lazarus, who is now blessed in Abraham's bosom, who enjoys an eternity of happiness for a moment's misery! But, my beloved, you know that it is not possible even to attain to that imagined happiness here. All the gain that is found is not able to quit the cost and expense of grief, vexation, care, toiling and sweating that is about them.

But if ye would be persuaded, there is that to be found easily, which you trouble yourselves seeking elsewhere, and believe me, though the general apprehension of men be,—that peace, plenty, preferment, and satisfaction in this life, to compensate their pains, are more easily attainable than fellowship and communion with God, yet I am persuaded that there is nothing more practicable than the life of religion. God hath condemned the world under vanity and a curse, and that which is crooked can by no art or strength be made straight, but he hath made this attainable by his gracious promises, even a blessed life, in approaching near to himself, the fountain of all life. And this is a certain good, an

universal good, and an eternal good. It will not disappoint you as other things do, of which you have no assurance for all your toilings. This is made more infallible to a soul that truly seeks it in God. It is as certain that they cannot be ashamed through frustration, as that he is faithful. And then it is an universal good, one comprehensive of all, one eminently and virtually all things created, to be joined to the infinite all fulness of God. This advanceth the soul to a participation of all that is in him. This is health, Psalm xlii. 11. Prov. iii. 8. This is light, John viii. 12. It is life, (John xi. 25,) liberty, (John viii. 36,) food and raiment, (Isa. lxi. 10, and John iv. 14,) and what not? It is profit, pleasure, preferment in the superlative degree, and not scattered in so many various streams which divide and distract the heart, but all combined in one. It is the true good of both soul and body, and so the only good of man. And lastly, it is eternal, to be coetaneous with thy soul. Of all other things it may be said, "I have seen an end of them," they were and are not. But this will survive time, and all the changes of it, and then it will begin to be perfect, when all perfection is at an end. Now, from all this, I would exhort you in Jesus Christ to ponder those things in your hearts, and consider them in reference to your own souls, that ye may say with David, "It is good for me to draw near to God."

[384]

That which all men seek after, is happiness and well being. Men pursue nothing but under the notion of good, and to complete that which may be called good, there is required some excellency in the thing itself, and then a conveniency and suitableness to us, and these jointly draw the heart of man. But the great misery is, that there is so much ignorance and misapprehension of that which is truly good, and then, when any thing of it is known, there is so little serious consideration and application of it to ourselves, and this makes the most part of men wander up and down in the pursuit of divers things, which are not that true good of the soul, and set their hearts on that which is not, until they find their hearts fall down as wanting a foundation and then they turn about

again to some other vanity. And so the wanderings and strayings of men are infinite, because the by ways are innumerable, though the true way be but one. Yea, the turnings and toilings of one man are various and manifold because he quickly loses the scent of happiness in every way he falls into and therefore must turn to another. And thus men are never at any solid setting about this great business, never resolute wherein this happiness consists, nor peremptory to follow it, but they fluctuate upon uncertain apprehensions, and diverse affections, until the time and date of salvation expire, and then they must know certainly and surely the inevitable danger and irrecoverable loss they have brought themselves, to, who would not take notice of the sure way, both of escaping wrath and attaining happiness while it was to be found.

Well, then, this is the great business we have here to do, yea, to make the circle the larger, it is that great business we have to do in this world, to know wherein the true well being and eternal welfare of our souls consist and by any means to apply unto that, as the only thing necessary, in regard of which, all other things are ceremonies, circumstances, and indifferent things. And to guide us in this examination and application, here is one man, who, having almost made shipwreck upon the rocks which men commonly dash upon, and being by the Lord led safely by, and almost arrived at the coast of true felicity, he sets out a beacon, and lights a candle to all who shall follow him, to direct them which way they shall steer their course. Examples teach more effectually than rules. It is easy for every man to speak well upon this point in general, and readily all will acknowledge that here it is, and nowhere else. But yet all this is outcried by the contrary noise of every man's practice. These general grants of truth are recalled in the conversations of men, therefore they cannot have much influence upon any man. But when we hear one speak, and see him walk so too, when we have the example of a most wise man, who wanted not these worldly expectations which other

men have, so that he not only propones it to us, but after much serious advisement, after mature consideration of all that can be said of the wicked's best estate, and the godly's worst, setting down resolute conclusions for himself—"It is good for me to draw near to God," yea, so determinate in it, that if none of the world should be of that mind, he would not change it,—though all should walk in other ways, he would choose to be rather alone in this, than in the greatest crowd of company in any other. Now, I say, when we have such a copy cast us, a man of excellent parts in sobriety and sadness, choosing that way, which all in words confess to be the best, should not this awake us out of our dreams and raise us up to some more attention and consideration of what we are doing? The words, you see, are the holy resolution of a holy heart, concerning that which is the chiefest good. You see the way to happiness, and you find the particular application of that to David's soul, or of his soul to it. We shall speak a word of the thing itself, then of the commendation of it, then of the application of it.

[385]

For the thing itself,—drawing near to God,—it gives us some ground to take a view of the posture in which men are found by nature, far off from God. Our condition by nature I cannot so fitly express, as in the apostle's words, (Eph. ii. 12,)—"Without Christ, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world." A deplorable estate indeed, hopeless and helpless! No hope in it, that is the extremity of misery, the refuse of all conditions. "Without Christ, and without God." Oh! these are words of infinite weight: without those, without whom it is simply impossible to be happy, and without whom it is not possible but to be miserable,—without the fountain of light, life, and consolation, without which there is nothing but pure darkness, without any beam of light; nothing but death, without the least breathing of life, nothing but vexation, without the least drop of consolation. In a word, without these, and wanting these, whom,

if you want, it were good to be spoiled of all being, to be nothing, if that could be, or never to have been any thing. Men will seek death, and cannot find it. O what a loss and deprivation is the loss of God, which makes death more desirable than life, and not to be at all, infinitely preferable to any being! Now, it is true, that the bringing in of multitudes within the pale of the visible church, is some degree of access and nearness to God, for then they become citizens as to external right, in the commonwealth of the church, and have the offers of the promises made to them, in respect of which visible standing, the apostle speaks of the whole church of Ephesus, “but now ye are made near who were far off,” (ver. 13,) notwithstanding, that many of them were found afterwards to have left their first love, Rev. ii. But yet, beloved, to speak more inwardly, and as your souls stand in the sight of God, the generality of those who are near hand in outward ordinances are yet far off from God in reality,—“without God and without Christ,” as really, as touching any soul-feeling, as those who are altogether without. The bond of union and peace was broken in paradise, sin dissolved it, and broke off that nearness and friendship with God, and from that day to this day, there hath been an infinite distance and separation betwixt man and God. The steps and degrees of it are many. There is darkness and blindness in men's minds. Such ignorance naturally possesseth the multitude, that it wholly alienates them from the life of God, Eph. iv. 18. For what fellowship can light, that pure light, have with such gross darkness as is among us? This certainly is the removal of that Sun of Righteousness from our souls, or the imposition of the clouds of transgression, that makes it so dark a night in the souls of men. And then there is nothing but enmity and desperate wickedness in the heart of man, and this keeps the stronghold of the affections, Rom. viii., Jer. xvii. There cannot be a further elongation or separation of the soul from God, than to turn so opposite, in all inclinations and dispositions, to his holy will, for the distance between God and us is not local in

the point of place, for whither shall we go from him who is everywhere? And thus he is near hand every one of us, but it is also real in the deformity and repugnancy of our natures to his holy will. But add unto this, that being thus separated in affection, and disjoined, as it were, in natural dispositions, we cannot draw near to God in any ordinance,—as the word, prayer, &c. Though we may, as that people, draw near with our lips, and ask of him our duty, and seem to delight to know him, yet there is this natural incapacity and crookedness in the heart of man, that it cannot truly approach unto the Father of spirits with any soul-desire and delight. But their hearts are removed far from me, Isa. xxix. 13, Matt. xv. 8. I think men might observe that their souls act not in religious business as they should, but that they remove their souls many miles distant from their bodies,—and they cannot keep any constancy in this approach of prayer to God, cannot walk with him in their conversation, or carry him along in their meditation. But there is one point of estrangement and separation superadded to all, that there is no man can come near to God without an oblation and offering of peace, that there is no approaching to him, but as to a continuing fire, except we can bring a sacrifice to appease, and a present to please Him for our infinite offences. There the difference stands,—we cannot draw near to walk together, till we be agreed. And, truly, this unto man is impossible, for we have nothing so precious as the redemption of our souls,—nothing can compensate infinite wrongs, or satisfy infinite justice. Now, this seems to make our nearness again desperate, and to put men furthest off from hope.

[386]

Notwithstanding, this is the very purpose of the gospel, preached from the beginning of the world, to remove that distance, and to take impediments of meeting out of the way; for that great obstruction, the want of a sacrifice and ransom, the Lord hath supplied it, he himself hath furnished it; and it was the great design carried on from the beginning of the world. But as the sun, the nearer he is, the more the earth is enlightened: so here,

first some dawning of light appears, as a messenger of hope, to tell that the Redeemer shall come,—that the true sacrifice shall be slain; then still the nearer his own appearing, the clearer are the manifestations of him, and the great design is more opened up, till at length he breaks out in glory from under a cloud, and shows himself to the world, to be that Lamb of God that should take away the sins of the world. And now, as the apostle to the Hebrews speaks, chap. vii. 19, “The law hath made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did, by the which we draw nigh to God.” All the sacrifices and shadows that were under the law did but point at this perfect ransom; and the way of access to God through a Mediator was not so clear; but now the matter is made as hopeful as is possible,—the partition-wall of the law's curses,—the hand-writing against us is removed on the cross,—the enmity slain,—the distance removed by the blood of the cross, being partly filled up by his descent into our nature, partly by his lower descent in our nature to suffer death. And this is the savoury oblation that we have to present to God, and may have boldness to come nigh because of it. And when once our access is made by the blood of Jesus Christ, then we are called and allowed to come still nigher, to cleave and adhere to him as our Father, to pray unto him, to walk with him. Then we should converse as friends and familiars together; then draw nigh to his light for illumination, and to him as the fountain of life for quickening, to place our delight and desire in him,—to forsake all other things, even our wills and pleasures, and to lose them, that they may be found in his; to converse much in his company, and be often in communication with him, and meditation upon him. This is the very design and substance of the gospel. It holds forth the way of making up the breach between man and God, of bringing you nigh who are yet afar off, and nearer who are near hand. O let us hearken to it!