

Lecture XVI.

Of Predestination

Rom. ix. 22.—“What if God, willing to show his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction.” Eph. i. 11.—“In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.”

We are now upon a high subject; high indeed for an eminent apostle, much more above our reach. The very consideration of God's infinite wisdom might alone suffice to restrain our limited thoughts, and serve to sober our minds with the challenge of our own ignorance and darkness; yet the vain and wicked mind of man will needs quarrel with God, and enter the lists of disputation with him, about his righteousness and wisdom in the counsel of election and reprobation: “But, O man, who art thou that repliest against God, or disputest?” ver. 20. This is a thing not to be disputed, but believed; and if ye will believe no more than ye can comprehend by sense or reason, then ye give his majesty no more credit than to weak mortal man. Whatever secret thoughts do rise up in thy heart when thou hearest of God's foreordaining men to eternal life, without previous foresight or consideration of their doings, and preparing men to eternal wrath, for the praise of his justice, without previous consideration of their de- [085] serving, and passing a definitive sentence upon the end of all men, before they do either good or evil; whenever any secret surmises rise in thy heart against this, learn to answer thus; enter not the lists of disputation with corrupt reason, but put in this bridle of the fear of God's greatness, and the consciousness of

thy own baseness, and labour to restrain thy undaunted and wild mind by it. Ponder that well, who thou art who disputest; who God is, against whom thou disputest—and if thou have spoken once, thou wilt speak no more—what thou art, who is as clay formed out of nothing; what he is, who is the former; and hath not the potter power over the clay? Consider but how great wickedness it is so much as to question him, or ask an account of his matters. After you have found his will to be the cause of all things, then to inquire farther into a cause of his will, which is alone the self-rule of righteousness, is to seek something above his will, and to reduce his majesty into the order of creatures. It is most abominable usurpation and sacrilege, for it both robs him of his royal prerogative, and instates the base footstool into his throne; but know, that certainly God will overcome when he is judged, Psal. i. 6. If thou judge him, he will condemn thee; if thou oppugn his absolute and holy decrees, he will hold thee fast bound by them to thy condemnation; he needs no other defence but to call out thy own conscience against thee, and bind thee over to destruction. Therefore, as one saith well, “Let the rashness of men be restrained from seeking that which is not, lest peradventure they find that which is.” Seek not a reason of his purposes, lest peradventure thou find thy own death and damnation infolded in them.

Paul mentions two objections of carnal and fleshly wisdom against this doctrine of election and reprobation, which indeed contain the sum of all that is vented and invented even to this day, to defile the spotless truth of God. All the whisperings of men tend to one of these two,—either to justify themselves, or to accuse God of unrighteousness; and shall any do it and be guiltless? I confess, some oppose this doctrine, not so much out of an intention of accusing God, as out of a preposterous and ignorant zeal for God; even as Job's friends did speak much for God. Nay, but it was not well spoken, they did but speak wickedly for him. Some speak much to the defence of his righteousness and

holiness, and, under pretence of that plea, make it inconsistent with these to fore-ordain to life or death without the foresight of their carriage; but shall they speak wickedly for God, or will he accept their person? He who looks into the secrets of the heart, knows the rise and bottom of such defences and apologies for his holiness to be partly self-love, partly narrow and limited thoughts of him, drawing him down to the determinations of his own greatest enemy, carnal reason. Since men will ascribe to him no righteousness, but such an one of their own shaping, and conformed to their own model, do they not indeed rob him of his holiness and righteousness?

I find two or three objections which may be reduced to this head. First, it seems unrighteousness with God, to predestinate men to eternal death, without their own evil deserving, or any forethought of it,—that before any man had a being, God should have been in his counsel fitting so many to destruction. Is it not a strange mocking of the creatures, to punish them for that sin and corruption, unto which by his eternal counsel they were fore-ordained? This is even that which Paul objects to himself, “Is there unrighteousness with God?” Is it not unrighteousness to hate Esau before he deserves it? Is he not unrighteous, to adjudge him to death before he do evil? ver. 14. Let Paul answer for us, “God forbid!” Why, there needs no more answer, but all thoughts or words which may in the least reflect upon his holiness are abomination. Though we could not tell how it is righteous and holy with him to do it, yet this we must hold, that it is. It is his own property to comprehend the reason of his counsels; it is our duty to believe what he reveals of them, without farther inquiry. He tells us, that thus it is clearly in this chapter; this far then we must believe. He tells us not how it is; then farther we should not desire to learn. God, in keeping silence of that, may put us to silence, and make us conceive that there is a depth to be admired, not sounded. Yet he goeth a little farther, and indeed as high as can be, to God's will—“He hath mercy on whom he will,

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and whom he will he hardeneth.” Now, farther he cannot go, for there is nothing above this. We may descend from this but we cannot ascend, or rise above it. But is this any answer to the argument? A sophister could press it further, and take advantage from that very ground—What! is not this to establish a mere tyranny in the Lord, that he doeth all things of mere will and pleasure, distributes rewards and punishments without previous consideration of men's carriage? But here we must stand, and go no farther than the scriptures walk with us. Whatever reasons or causes may be assigned, yet certainly we must at length come up hither. All things are, because he so willed, and why willed we should not ask a reason, because his will is supreme reason, and the very self rule of all righteousness. Therefore if we once know his will, we should presently conclude that it is most righteous and holy. If that evasion of the foreknowledge of men's sins and impenitency had been found solid, certainly Paul would have answered so, and not have had his refuge to the absolute will and pleasure of God, which seem to perplex it more. But he knew well that there could nothing of that kind, whether good or evil, either actually be without his will, or be to come without the determination of the same will, and so could not be foreseen without the counsel of his will upon it and therefore it had been but a poor shift to have refuge to that starting hole of foreknowledge, out of which he must presently flee to the will and pleasure of God, and so he betakes him straightway to that he must hold at, and opposes that will to man's doings. “It is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy.” If he had meant only that Jacob and Esau had actually done neither good or evil, he needed not return to the sanctuary of God's will, for still it might be said, it is of him that runs and wills and not of God's will as the first original, because their good and evil foreseen did move him to such love and hatred. It is all alike of works of men, whether these works be present or to come; therefore I would advise every one of you, whatever ye

conceive of his judgment or mercy, if he have showed mercy to you, O then rest not in thyself, but arise and ascend till thou come to the height of his eternal free purpose! And if thou conceive the sin, and misery, and judgment, thou mayest go up also to his holy counsels, for the glory of his name, and silence thyself with them. But it shall be most expedient for thee in the thought of thy miseries, to return always within, and search the corruption of thy nature, which may alone make thee hateful enough to God. If thou search thy own conscience, it will stop thy mouth, and make thee guilty before God. Let not the thought of his eternal counsels diminish the conviction of thy guilt, or the hatred of thyself for sin and corruption, but dwell more constantly upon this, because thou art called and commanded so to do. One thing remains fixed,—though he hath fore-ordained man to death, yet none shall be damned till his conscience be forced to say, that he is worthy of it a thousand times.

There is another whispering and suggestion of the wicked hearts of men against the predestination of God, which insinuates that God is an accepter of persons, and so accuses him of partial and unrighteous dealing, because he deals not equally with all men. Do ye not say this within yourselves—If he find all guilty, why does he not punish all? Why does he spare some? And if ye look upon all men in his first and primitive thought of them, as neither doing good nor evil, why does he not have mercy on all? But is thine eye evil because he is good? May he not do with his own as he pleases? Because he is merciful to some souls, shall men be displeased, and do well to be angry? Or, because he, of his own free grace, extends it, shall he be bound by a rule to do so with all? Is not he both just and merciful, and is it not meet that both be showed forth? If he punish thee, thou canst not complain, for thou deservest it, if he show mercy, why should any quarrel, for it is free and undeserved grace. By saving some, he shows his grace; by destroying others, he shows what all deserve. God is so far from being an accepter of

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persons according to their qualifications and conditions, that he finds nothing in any creature to cast the balance of his choice. If he did choose men for their works' sake, or outward privileges, and refuse others for the want of these, then it might be charged on him, but he rather goes over all these, nay, he finds none of these. In his first view of men he beholds them all alike, and nothing to determine his mind to one more than another, so that his choice proceedeth wholly from within his own breast,—“I will have mercy on whom I will.” But then, thirdly, Our hearts object against the righteousness of God, that this fatal chain of predestination overturns all exhortations and persuasions to godliness, all care and diligence in well-doing. For thus do many profane souls conceive—If he be in one mind, who can turn him? Then, what need I pray, since he has already determined what shall be, and what shall become of me? His purpose will take effect whether I pray or pray not; my prayer will not make him change his mind, and if it be in his mind he will do it, if he hath appointed to save us, saved we shall be, live as we list; if he hath appointed us to death, die we must, live as we can. Therefore men, in this desperate estate, throw themselves headlong into all manner of iniquity, and that with quietness and peace. Thus do many souls perish upon the stumbling-stone laid in Zion, and wrest the truths and counsels of God to their own destruction, even quite contrary to their true intent and meaning. Paul, (Eph. i. 4) speaks another language—“He hath chosen us in him,—that we should be holy and without blame.” His eternal counsel of life is so far from loosing the reins to men's lusts, that it is the only certain foundation of holiness; it is the very spring and fountain from whence our sanctification flows by an infallible course. This chain of God's counsels concerning us, hath also linked together the end and the means,—glory and grace,—happiness and holiness,—that there is no destroying of them. Without holiness it is impossible to see God, so that those who expect the one without any desire of, and endeavour after

the other, they are upon a vain attempt to loose the links of this eternal chain. It is the only eternal choosing love of God, which separated so many souls from the common misery of men. It is that only which in time doth appear, and rise as it were from under ground, in the streams or fruits of sanctification. And if the ordinance of life stand, so shall the ordinance of fruits, John xv. 16, Eph. ii. 10. If he hath appointed thee to life, it is certain he has also ordained thee to fruits, and chosen thee to be holy; so that whatever soul casts by the study of this, there is too gross a brand of perdition upon its forehead. It is true, all is already determined with him, and he is incapable of any change, or “shadow of turning.” Nothing then wants, but he is in one mind about it, and thy prayer cannot turn him. Yet a godly soul will pray with more confidence, because it knows that as he hath determined upon all its wants and receipts, so he hath appointed this to be the very way of obtaining what it wants. This is the way of familiarity and grace. He takes with his own to make them call, and he performs his purpose in answer to their cry. But suppose there were nothing to be expected by prayer, yet I say, that is not the thing thou shouldst look to, but what is required of thee, as thy duty, to do that simply out of regard to his majesty, though thou shouldst never profit by it. This is true obedience, to serve him for his own pleasure, though we had no expectation of advantage by it. Certainly he doth not require thy supplications for this end, to move him, and incline his affections toward thee, but rather as a testimony of thy homage and subjection to him; therefore, though they cannot make him of another mind than he is, or hasten performance before his purposed time—so that in reality they have no influence upon him—yet in praying, and praying diligently, thou declarest thy obligation to him, and respect to his majesty, which is all thou hast to look to, committing the event solely to his good pleasure.

The second objection Paul mentions, tends to justify men. “Why then doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his

will?" Since by his will he hath chained us with an inevitable necessity to sin, what can we do? Men cannot wrestle with him, why then doth he condemn and accuse them? "But who art thou, O man, who disputest against God?" As if Paul had said, thou art a man, and so I am, why then lookest thou for an answer from me? Let us rather both consider whom we speak of, whom thou accusest, and whom I defend. It is God; what art thou then to charge him, or what am I so to clear him? Believing ignorance is better than presumptuous knowledge, especially in those forbidden secrets in which it is more concerning to be ignorant with faith and admiration, than to know with presumption. Dispute *thou*, O man, *I* will wonder, reply *thou*, *I* will believe! Doth it become thee, the clay, to speak so to thy Former, "Why hast thou made me thus?" Let the consideration of the absolute right and dominion of God over us,—more than any creature hath over another, yea, or over themselves,—let that restrain us, and keep us within bounds. He may do with us what he pleaseth, for his own honour and praise, but it is his will that we should leave all the blame to ourselves, and rather behold the evident cause of our destruction in our sin, which is nearer us, than to search into a secret and incomprehensible cause in God's counsel.