

Lecture XXII.

Of The First Covenant.

Gal. iii. 12.—“The law is not of faith; but the man that doeth them shall live in them.”—Gen. ii. 17.—“But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die.”

The Lord made all things for himself, to show forth the glory of his name; and man in a more eminent and special manner, for more eminent manifestations of himself; therefore all his dealings towards men, whether righteous or sinful, do declare the glory of God. Particularly, in reference to the present purpose, he resolved to manifest two shining properties,—his sovereignty and goodness. His sovereignty is showed, in giving out a law and command to the creature; and his goodness is manifested in making a covenant with his creature; as here you see the terms of a covenant, a duty required, and a promise made, and, in case of failing, a threatening conformed to the promise. He might have required obedience simply, as the Lord and sovereign owner of the being and operations of the creatures; and that was enough of obligation to bind all flesh, that the Creator is lawgiver, that he who gives a being doth set bounds and limits to the exercise and use of that being. But it pleased the Lord, in his infinite goodness and love, to add a promise and threatening to that law and command, and so turns it to the nature of a voluntary covenant and agreement, whereby he doth mitigate and sweeten his authority and power, and condescends so low to man as to take on himself a greater obligation than he puts upon man, “Do this, and thou shalt live.” He might then, out of his absoluteness and power, have required at the creature's hand any terms he

pleased, even the hardest which could be imagined, and yet no injustice in him. He might have put laws on men to restrain all their natural liberty, and in every thing, to proclaim nothing but his own supremacy. But O what goodness and condescension is even in the very matter of the law; and then in the manner of prescribing it with a promise! In the matter, so just and equitable to convince all men's consciences, yea, even engraven on their hearts, that he lays not many burdens on, but what men's consciences must lay on themselves; that there is nothing in it all, when summed up, harder than this,—love God most of all, and thy neighbour as thyself, which all men must proclaim to be due, though it had not been required; and but one precept added by his mere will, which yet was so easy a thing, as it was a wonder the Lord of all put no other conditions on the creatures. And then for the manner; that it is propounded covenant-wise, with a promise, not to expect the creature's consent—for it did not depend on his acceptance, he being bound to accept any terms his Lord propounded—but because the matter and all was so equitable, and the conditions so ample, that if it had been propounded to any rational man, he would have consented with an admiration at God's goodness. Indeed, if we speak strictly, there cannot be a proper covenant between God and man,—there is such an infinite distance between such unequal parties, our obedience and performance being absolutely in his power. We cannot promise it as our own, and it being but our duty, we cannot crave or expect a reward in justice, neither can he owe any thing to the creature. Yet it pleased his majesty to propound it in these terms, and to stoop so low unto men's capacities, and, as it were, come off the throne of his sovereignty, both to require such duties of men, and to promise unto them such a free reward. And the reasons of this may be plain upon God's part and upon ours. In such dealing, he consulted his own glory, and man's good. His own glory, I say, is manifested in it, and chiefly the glory of his goodness and love, that the Most High comes down so low

as to article with his own footstool, that he changes his absolute right into a moderate and temperate government, and tempers his lordly and truly monarchical power by such a commixture of gentleness and goodness, in requiring nothing but what man behoved to call reasonable and due, and in promising so much as no creature could challenge any title to it. When the law was promulgated, "Do this," eat not of this tree, Adam's conscience behoved to say, "Amen, Lord; all is due, all the reason in the world for it." But when the promise is added, and the trumpet sounds longer, "Thou shalt live!" O more than reason, more than is due, must his conscience say! It was reason, that the most high Lord should use his footstool as his footstool, and set his servant in the place of a servant, and so keep distance from him. But how strange is it that he humbles himself to make friendship with man, to assume him in a kind of familiarity and equality? And this Christ is not forgetful of. When he restores men, he puts them in all their former dignities; "I call you not servants but friends." Next, his wisdom doth appear in this, that when he had made a reasonable creature, he takes a way of dealing, suitable to his nature, to bring forth willing and free obedience by the persuasion of such a reward, and the terror of such a punishment. He most wisely did enclose the will of man, as it were, on both sides, with hedges of punishment and reward, which might have been a sufficient defence or guard against all the irruptions of contrary persuasions, that man might continue in obedience, and that when he went to the right hand or left, he might be kept in, by the hope of such an ample promise, and the fear of such a dreadful threatening. But then the righteousness of God doth appear in this; for there is nothing doth more illustrate the justice of the judge, than when the malefactor hath before consented to such a punishment in case of transgression, when the law is confirmed by the consent and approbation of man. Now he has man subscribing already to his judgment, and so all the world must stop their mouth and become guilty in case of transgression

of such a righteous command after such warning.

But, in the next place, it is no less for man's good. What an honour and dignity was put upon man, when he was taken into friendship with God! To be in covenant of friendship with a king, O what a dignity is it accounted! And some do account it a great privilege to be in company, and converse with some eminent and great person. But may not men say with the Psalmist, Lord, "what is man that thou art mindful of him, or the son of man that thou visitest him?" Psal. viii. Again, what way more fit and suitable to stir up and constrain Adam unto a willing and constant obedience, when he had the encouragement of such a gracious reward, and the determent of such a fearful punishment? Between these two banks might the silver streams of obedience have run for ever without breaking over. He was bound to all, though nothing had been promised. But then to have such a hope, what spirits might it add to him? The Lord had been free, upon man's obedience, either to continue him his happy estate, or to denude him of it, or to annihilate him. There was no obligation lying on him. But now, what confirmation might man have by looking upon the certain recompense of reward—when God brings himself freely under an obligation of a promise, and so ascertains it to his soul, which he could never have dreamed of, and gives him liberty to challenge him upon his faithfulness to perform it! [106]

And then, lastly, There was no way so fit to commend God, and sweeten him unto his soul as this. Adam knew that his goodness could not extend to God; that his righteousness could not help him, nor his wickedness hurt him, and so could expect nothing from his exact obedience. But now, when God's goodness doth so overflow upon the creature, and the Lord takes pleasure to communicate himself to make others happy, though he had need of none, O how must it engage the heart of man to a delightful remembrance, and converse with that God! As his authority should imprint reverence, so his goodness thus mani-

fested should engrave confidence. And thus the life of man was not only a life of obedience, but a life of pleasure and delight; not only a holy, but a happy life, yea, happy in holiness.

Now, as it was Paul's great business in preaching, to ride marches between the covenant of grace, and the covenant of works,—to take men off that old broken ship to this sure plank of grace that is offered by Jesus Christ to drowning souls,—so it would be our great work to show unto you the nature of this covenant, and the terms thereof, that you may henceforth find and know that salvation to be now impossible by the law which so many seek in it. We have no errand to speak of the first Adam, but the better to lead you to the second. Our life was once in the first, but he lost himself and us both; but the second, by losing himself, saves both. We have nothing to do to speak of the first covenant, but that we may lead you, or pursue you rather to the second, established on better terms and better promises.

The terms of this covenant are,—Do this and live. Perfect obedience without one jot of failing or falling,—an entire and universal accomplishment of the whole will of God,—that is the duty required of man. There is no latitude left in the bargain to admit endeavours instead of performance, or desire instead of duty. There is no place for repentance here. If a man fail in one point, he falls from the whole promise; by the tenor of this bargain, there is no hope of recovery. If you would have the duty in a word, it is a love of God with all our heart and soul, and our neighbour as ourselves; and that testified and verified in all duties and offices of obedience to God, and love to men, without the least mixture of sin and infirmity. Now, the promise on God's part is indeed larger than that duty, not only because undeserved, but even in the matter of it, it is so abundant,—life, eternal life, continuance in a happy estate. There is a threatening added, “In the day thou eatest thou shalt surely die;” that is, thou shalt become a mortal and miserable creature, subject to misery here and hereafter; which is more pressingly set down

in that word, “Cursed is he that abideth not in all things written in the law to do them.” It is very peremptory; that men dream not of escaping wrath when they break but in one, suppose they did abide in all the rest. Cursed is every man from the highest to the lowest; the Lord Almighty is engaged against him. His countenance, his power is against him, to destroy him and make him miserable. Whoever doth fail but in one jot of the commands, he shall not only fall from that blessed condition freely promised, but lose all that he already possessed, fall from that image of God, dominion over the creatures, and incur, instead of that possessed and expected happiness, misery here on soul and body, in pains, sicknesses, troubles, griefs, &c., and eternal misery on both, without measure, hereafter,—“eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord, and the glory of his power.” [107]

Now, “the law is not of faith,” saith the apostle. This opens up the nature of the bargain; and the opposition between the present covenant and that which is made with lost sinners with a Mediator. This covenant is called, of works, “Do this, and live;” *to him that worketh is the promise made, though freely too.* It is grace, that once a reward should be promised to obedience; but having once resolved to give it, herein justice appears in an equal and uniform distribution of the reward, according to works; so that where there is an equality of works there shall be an equality of reward, and no difference put between persons equal; which is the very freedom of the covenant of grace, that it passes over all such considerations, and deals equally in mercy with unequal sinners, and unequally, it may be, with them that are equal in nature.

You may ask, was not Adam to believe in God and did not the law require faith? I answer, Christ distinguishes a twofold faith: “You believe in God, believe also in me.” No question he was called to believe in God the creator of the world, and that in a threefold consideration.

First, to depend on God the self-being and fountain-good. His

own goodness was but a flux and emanation from that Sun of Righteousness, and so was to be perpetuated by constant abiding in his sight. The interposition of man's self between him and God did soon bring on this eternal night of darkness. Nature might have taught him to live in him in whom he had life and being and motion, and to forget and look over his own perfections as evanishing shadows. But this quickly extinguished his life, when he began to live in himself.

Next, he was obliged to believe God's word, both threatening and promise, and to have these constantly in his view. And certainly, if he had kept in his serious consideration, the inestimable blessing of life promised, and the fearful curse of death threatened,—if he had not been induced first to doubt, and then to deny the truth and reality of these,—he had not attempted such a desperate rebellion against the Lord.

Then, thirdly, he was to believe and persuade himself of the Lord's fatherly love, and that the Lord was well-pleased with his obedience; and this faith would certainly beget much peace and quietness in his mind, and also constrain him to love him, and live to him who loved him, and gave him life and happiness out of love. Yet this holds true that the apostle saith, “the law is not of faith,” to wit, in a Mediator and Redeemer. It was a bond of immediate friendship; there needed none to mediate between God and man; there needed no reconciler where there was no odds nor distance. But the gospel is of faith in a Mediator; it is the soul plighting its hope upon Jesus Christ in its desperate necessity, and so supposes man sinful and miserable in himself, and in his own sense too, and so putting over his weight and burden upon one whom God hath made mighty to save. The law is not of faith, but of perfect works,—a watch-word brought in of purpose to bring men off their hankering after a broken and desperate covenant. It admits no repentance, it speaks of no pardon, it declares no cautioner or redeemer. There is nothing to be expected, according to the tenor of that covenant, but

wrath from heaven; either personal obedience in all, or personal punishment for ever. That is the very terms of it, and it knows no other thing. Either bring complete righteousness and holiness to the promise of life, or expect nothing but death.

This may be a sad meditation to us, to stand and look back to our former estate, and compare it with that into which we are fallen. That image we spoke of, is defaced and blotted out, which was the glory of the creation; and now there is nothing so monstrous, so deformed in the world as man. The corruption of the best things is always worst; the ruins of the most noble creature are most ruinous; the spot of the soul most abominable. We are nothing but a mass of darkness, ignorance, error, inordinate lust; nothing but confusion, disorder, and distempers in the soul, and in the conversation of men; and, in sum, that blessed bond of friendship with God broken, discord and enmity entered upon our side and separated us from God, and so we can expect nothing from that first covenant but the curse and wrath threatened. "By one man's disobedience" sin entered upon all, "and death by sin;" because in that agreement Adam was a common person representing us, and thus are all men once subject to God's judgment, and come short of the glory of God, fallen from life into a state of death, and, for any thing that could be expected, irrecoverably. But it hath pleased the Lord, in his infinite mercy, to make a better covenant in Christ his Son, that, what was impossible to the law, by reason of our weakness and wickedness, his Son, sent in the flesh, condemned for sin, might accomplish, Rom. viii. 3. There is some comfort yet after this; that covenant was not the last, and that sentence was not irrevocable. He makes a new transaction, lays the iniquity of his elect upon Christ, and puts the curse upon his shoulders which was due to them. Justice cannot admit the abrogation of the law, but mercy pleads for a temperament of it. And thus the Lord dispenses with personal satisfaction, which in rigour he might have craved; and finds out a ransom, admits another

[108]

satisfaction in their name. And in the name of that Cautioner and Redeemer is salvation preached upon better terms: Believe and thou shalt be saved, Rom. x. 9. Thou lost and undone sinner, whoever thou art, that findest thyself guilty before God, and that thou canst not stand in judgment by the former covenant,—thou who hast no personal righteousness, and trustest in none,—come here, embrace the righteousness of thy Cautioner,—receive him, and rest on him, and thou shalt be saved.