

Lecture III.

The Authority And Utility Of The Scriptures

2 Tim. iii. 16.—“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”

We told you that there was nothing more necessary to know than what our end is, and what the way is that leads to that end. We see the most part of men walking at random,—running an uncertain race,—because they do not propose unto themselves a certain scope to aim at, and whither to direct their whole course. According to men's particular inclinations and humours so do the purposes and designs of men vary; and often do the purposes of one man change, according to the circumstances of time and his condition in the world. We see all men almost running cross one to another. One drives at the satisfaction of his lust by pleasure; another fancies a great felicity in honour; a third in getting riches; and thus men divide themselves; whereas, if it were true happiness that all were seeking, they would all go one way towards one end. If men be not in the right way, the faster they seem to move toward the mark, the farther they go from it. Wandering from the right way, (suppose men intend well) will put them farther from that which they intend. *Si via in contrarium ducat, ipsa velocitas majoris intervalli causa est.* Therefore it concerns us all most deeply to be acquainted with the true path of blessedness; for if we once mistake, the more we do, the swifter we move, the more distant we are from it indeed. And there is the more need, because there are so many by-paths that lead to destruction. What say I? By-paths! No; highways, beaten paths, that the multitude of men walk in, and

[013]

never challenge, nor will endure to be challenged as if they were in an error! In other journeys, men keep the plain highway, and are afraid of any secret by-way, lest it lead them wrong: *At hic, via quæque tritissima maxime decipit*. Here the high-pathed way leads wrong, and O, far wrong!—to hell. This is the meaning of Christ's sermon, “Enter in at the strait gate, but walk not in the broad way where many walk, for it leads to destruction.” Therefore I would have this persuasion once begotten in your souls, that the course of this world,—the way of the most part of men,—is dangerous, is damnable. O consider whither the way will lead you, before you go farther! Do not think it a folly to stand still now, and examine it, when you have gone on so long in their company. Stand, I say, and consider! Be not ignorant as beasts, that know no other things than to follow the drove; *quæ pergunt, non quo eundum est, sed quo itur*; they follow not whither they ought to go, but whither most go. You are men, and have reasonable souls within you; therefore I beseech you, be not composed and fashioned according to custom and example, that is, brutish, but according to some inward knowledge and reason. Retire once from the multitude, and ask in earnest at God, What is the way? Him that fears him he will teach the way that he should choose. The way to his blessed end is very strait, very difficult; you must have a guide in it,—you must have a lamp and a light in it,—else you cannot but go wrong.

The principles of reason within us are too dark and dim; they will never lead us through the pits and snares in the way. These indeed shined so brightly in Adam that he needed no light without him, no voice about him; but sin hath extinguished it much; and there remains nothing but some little spunk or sparkle, under the ashes of much corruption, that is but insufficient in itself, and is often more blinded and darkened by lusts. So that if it were never so much refined—as it was in many heathens—yet it is but the blind leading the blind, and both must fall into the ditch. Our end is high and divine,—to glorify God and to enjoy him; therefore

our reason *caligat ad suprema*; it can no more steadfastly behold that glorious end, and move towards it, than our weak eyes can behold the sun. Our eyes can look downward upon the earth, but not upward to the heavens: so we have some remnant of reason in us, that hath some petty and poor ability for matters of little moment, as the things of this life; but if we once look upward to the glory of God, or eternal happiness, our eyes are dazzled, our reason confounded, we cannot steadfastly behold it, Eph. iv. 18; 2 Cor. iii. 13, 14.

Therefore the Lord hath been pleased to give us the scriptures, which may be “a lamp unto our feet,” and a guide unto our way; whereunto we shall do well “to take heed, as unto [a candle or] a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn,” 2 Peter i. 19. These are “able to make us wise unto salvation.” Let us hear what Paul speaks to Timothy, 2 Tim. iii. 16, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God,” &c.: where you have two points of high concernment,—the authority of the scriptures, and their utility. Their authority, for they are given by divine inspiration; their utility, for they are “profitable for doctrine,” &c., and can make us perfect, and well “furnished to every good work.”

The authority of it is in a peculiar way divine. “Of him and through him are all things.” All writings of men, according to the truth of the scriptures, have some divinity in them, inasmuch as they have of truth, which is a divine thing. Yet the holy scriptures are by way of excellency attributed to God, for they are immediately inspired of God. Therefore Peter saith that “the scriptures came not in old time by the will of man, but holy men spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost,” 2 Peter i. 21. God by his Spirit, as it were, acted the part of the soul in the prophets and apostles; and they did no more but utter what the Spirit conceived. The Holy Ghost inspired the matter and the words, and they were but tongues and pens to speak and write it unto the people; there needed no debate, no search in their own minds for the truth, no inquisition for light; but light shined upon

[014]

their souls so brightly, so convincingly, that it put it beyond all question that it was the mind and voice of God. You need not ask, How they did know that their dreams or visions were indeed from the Lord, and that they did not frame any imagination in their own hearts and taught it for his word, as many did? I say, you need no more ask that than ask, How shall a man see light or know the sunshine? Light makes itself manifest, and all other things. It is seen by its own brightness. Even so the holy men of God needed not any mark or sign to know the Spirit's voice, his revelation needed not the light of any other thing, it was light itself. It would certainly overpower the soul and mind, and leave no place of doubting. God, who cannot be deceived, and can deceive no man, hath delivered us this doctrine. O with what reverence shall we receive it, as if we heard the Lord from heaven speak. If you ask, How you shall be persuaded that the scriptures are the word of God,—His very mind opened to men and made legible. Truly there are some things cannot be well proved, not because they are doubtful but because they are clear of themselves, and beyond all doubt and exception. Principles of arts must not be proved, but supposed, till you find by trial and experience afterward that they were indeed really true. There are, no question, such characters of divinity and majesty imprinted in the very scriptures themselves, that whosoever hath the eyes of his understanding opened, though he run he may read them, and find God in them. What majesty is in the very simplicity and plainness of the scriptures! They do not labour to please men's ears, and adorn the matter with the curious garments of words and phrases, but represent the very matter itself to the soul, as that which in itself is worthy of all acceptance, and needs no human eloquence to commend it. Painting doth spoil native beauty. External ornaments would disfigure some things that are of themselves proportioned and lovely, therefore the Lord chooses a plain and simple style which is foolishness to the world, but in these swaddling clothes of the scriptures, and

this poor cottage the child Jesus, the Lord of heaven and earth, is contained. There is a jewel of the mysterious wisdom of God, and man's eternal blessedness, in this mineral. What glorious and astonishing humility is here! What humble and homely glory and majesty also! He is most high, and yet none so lowly. What excellent consent and harmony of many writers in such distant times! Wonder at it. All speak one thing to one purpose,—to bring men to God, to abase all glory, and exalt him alone. Must it not be one spirit that hath quickened all these and breathes in them all this one heavenly song of “glory to God on high and good will towards men.” Other writers will reason these things with you to convince you and persuade you, and many think them more profound and deep for that reason, and do despise the baseness of the scriptures, but to them whose eyes are opened, the majesty and authority of God commanding and asserting and testifying to them, is more convincing from its own bare assertion, than all human reason.

Although there be much light in the scriptures to guide men's way to God's glory and their own happiness, yet it will all be to small purpose if “the eyes of our understanding be darkened and blinded.” If you shall surround a man with day light, except he open his eyes he cannot see. The scriptures are a clear sun of life and righteousness, but the blind soul encompassed with that light is nothing the wiser, but thinks the lamp of the word shines not, because it sees not, it hath its own dungeon within it. Therefore the Spirit of God must open the eyes of the blind, and enlighten the eyes of the understanding, that the soul may see wonderful things in God's law, Psal. cxix. 5, 18. The light may shine in the darkness, but “the darkness comprehendeth it not,” John i. 5. I wonder not that the most part of men can see no beauty, no majesty, no excellency in the holy scriptures to allure them, because they are natural, and have not the Spirit of God, and so cannot know these things “for they are spiritually discerned,” 1 Cor. ii. 14. Therefore as the inspiration of God did

conceive this writing at first, and preached this doctrine unto the world, so there can no soul understand it, or profit by it, but by the inspiration of the Almighty. “Verily there is a spirit in man, and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth him understanding,” saith Job. When the Spirit comes into the soul to engrave the characters of that law and truth into the heart which were once engraven on tables of stone, and not written with pen and ink, then the Spirit of Christ Jesus writes over and transcribes the doctrine of the gospel on “the fleshly tables of the heart,”—draws the lineaments of that faith and love preached in the word upon the soul, then the soul is “the epistle of Christ,” “written not with [pen and] ink, but with the Spirit of the living God,” 2 Cor. iii. 3. And then the soul is manifestly declared to be such, when that which is impressed on the heart is expressed in the outward man in walking, that it may be “read of all men.” Now the soul having thus received the image of the scriptures on it, understands the Spirit’s voice in them, and sees the truth and divinity of them. The eye must receive some species and likeness of the object before it see it, it must be made like to the object ere it can behold it,—*Intelligens in arta fit ipsum intelligibile*, so the soul must have some inspiration of the Holy Ghost, before it can believe with the heart the inspired scriptures.

[015]

Now, for the utility and profit of the scriptures, who can speak of it according to its worth? Some things may be over commended,—nay, all things but this one,—God speaking in his word to mankind. Many titles are given to human writings, some are called accurate, some subtile, some ingenious and some profound and deep, some plain, some learned, but call them what they please, the scripture may vindicate to itself these two titles as its own prerogative,—holy and profitable. The best speaker in the world in many words cannot want sin, the best writer hath some dross and refuse, but here, all is holy, all is profitable. Many books are to no purpose but to feed and inflame men’s lusts, many serve for nothing but to spend and drive over the time, without

thought most part are good for nothing but to burden and over weary the world to put them in a fancy of knowledge which they have not, many serve for this only, to nourish men's curiosity and vain imaginations, and contentions about words and notions, but here is a book profitable,—all profitable. If you do not yet profit by it, you can have no pleasure in it, it is only ordained for soul's profiting, not for pleasing your fancy, not for matter of curious speculation, not for contention and strife about the interpretation of it. Many books have nothing in them, but specious titles to commend them, they do nothing less than what they promise, they have a large and fair entry, which leads only into a poor cottage, but the scriptures have no hyperbolic and superlative styles to allure men, they hold out a plain and common gate and entry which will undoubtedly lead to a pleasant palace, others *et prodesse volunt et delectare*, but these certainly *et prodesse volunt et possunt*,—they both can profit you and will profit you. I wish that souls would read the scriptures as profitable scriptures with the intention to profit. If you do not read with such a purpose, you read not the scriptures of God, they become as another book unto you. But what are they profitable for? For doctrine, and a divine doctrine, a doctrine of life and happiness. It is the great promise of the new covenant, “You shall be all taught of God.” The scriptures can make a man learned and wise, learned to salvation, it is foolishness to the world, “but the world through wisdom know not God.” Alas! what then do they know? Is there any besides God? And is there any knowledge besides the knowledge of God? You have a poor petty wisdom among you to gather riches and manage your business. Others have a poor imaginary wisdom that they call learning, and generally people think, to pray to God is but a paper-skill, a little book-craft, they think the knowledge of God is nothing else but to learn to read the Bible. Alas! mistake not, it is another thing to know God. The doctrine of Jesus Christ written on the heart is a deep profound learning and the poor, simple, rudest people, may by

the Spirit's teaching become wiser than their ancients, than their ministers. O, it is an excellent point of learning, to know how to be saved. What is it, I pray you to know the course of the heavens,—to number the orbs, and the stars in them—to measure their circumference,—to reckon their motions,—and yet not to know him that sits on the circle of them, and not know how to inhabit and dwell there? If you would seek unto God, and seek eyes opened to behold the mystery of the word, you would become wiser than your pastors, you would learn from the Spirit to pray better, you would find the way to heaven better than they can teach you, or walk in it.

Then, it is “profitable for reproof and correction.” It contains no doctrine very pleasant to men's natural humours, but it is indeed most pleasant to a right and ordered taste. You know, the distemper of the eye, or the perverting of the taste, will misrepresent pleasant things, and sweet things to the senses, and make them appear ill savoured and bitter. But, I say, to a discerning spirit there is nothing so sweet, so comely. “I have seen an end of all perfection,” but none of thy law. “Thy word is sweeter to me than the honey, or the honey comb.” If a soul be prepossessed with the love of the world, and the lusts of the world, it cannot savour and taste of them, that vicious quality in the mind will make the pleasant gospel unpleasant. “I piped unto you and ye have not danced.” But however, the scriptures are then most profitable when they are least pleasant to our corruptions, and, therefore, it is an absolute and entire piece. *Ut prodesse volunt et delectare. Omne tulit punctum, qui miscuit utile dulci.* There are sharp reproofs, and sad corrections of his holy law which must make way for the pleasant and sweet gospel. There is a reproof of life—a wounding before healing—that whoso refuse them, despise their own soul, but “the ear that heareth them abideth among the wise,” Prov. xv 31, 32. Woe unto that soul that correction or reproof or threatening is grievous unto, “he shall die,” Prov. xv. 10, “he is brutish,” Prov. xii. 1. There is a generation of

men that can endure to hear nothing but gospel promises, that cry out against all reproving of sins, and preaching of God's wrath against unbelieving sinners as legal, and meddling with other men's matters, especially if they reprove the sins of rulers, their public state enormities, as if the whole word of God were not profitable, as if reproofs were not as wholesome as consolations, as if threatenings did not contribute to make men flee from the wrath to come into a city of refuge. Let such persons read their own character out of wise Solomon, "Correction is grievous to them that forsake the way." "Rebuke a wise man, and he will love thee, give instruction to a wise man, and he will be yet wiser," Prov. ix. 8, 9. If we were pleasers of men, then were we not the servants of Jesus Christ, let us strive to profit men, but not to please them. Peace, peace, which men's own hearts fancy, would please them, but it were better for them to be awakened out of that dream, by reproof, by correction, and he that will do so, shall "find more favour of him afterwards, than he that flattereth with the tongue," Prov. xxviii. 23.

Well then, let this be established in your hearts as the foundation of all true religion, that the scriptures are the word of the eternal God, and that they contain a perfect and exact rule both of glorifying God and of the way to enjoy him. They can make you perfect to every good work. I shall say no more on this, but beseech you, as you love your own souls, be acquainting yourselves with them. You will hear, in these days of men pretending to more divine and spiritual discoveries and revelations than the scriptures contain but, my brethren, these can make you "wise to salvation," these can make you "perfect to every good work." Then, what needs more? All that is besides salvation, and beyond perfection, count it superfluous and vain, if not worse, if not diabolical. Let others be wise to their own destruction,—let them establish their own imaginations for the word of God, and rule of their faith,—but hold you fast what you have received, and "contend earnestly for it." Add nothing, and diminish nothing,

let this lamp shine “till the day dawn, 'till the morning of the resurrection,” and walk ye in the light of it, and do not kindle any other sparkles, else ye shall lie down in the grave in sorrow, and rise in sorrow. Take the word of God as the only rule, and the perfect rule,—a rule for all your actions, civil, natural, and religious, for all must be done to his glory, and his word teacheth how to attain to that end. Let not your imaginations, let not others example, let not the preaching of men, let not the conclusions and acts of Assemblies be your rule, but in as far as you find them agreeing with the perfect rule of God's holy word. All other rules are *regulæ regulatæ*, they are but like publications and intimations of the rule itself. Ordinances of assemblies are but like the herald promulgation of the king's statute and law, if it vary in any thing from his intention, it is not valid and binding. I beseech you, take the scriptures for the rule of your walking or else you will wander, the scripture is *regula regulans*, a ruling rule. If you be not acquainted with it, you must follow the opinions or examples of other men, and what if they lead you unto destruction?