

SERMON XI.

THE NATURE OF UNBELIEF OPENED UP, AND ITS PER- NICIOUS INFLUENCE UPON PROFESSORS OF THE GOS- PEL ILLUSTRATED.

HEB. iii. 12.—“Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.”

FROM the seventh verse of this chapter, the apostle presses the Hebrews to improve the great doctrine about the gospel-prophet, by alleging a sad example of their fathers, who refused to hear and obey him in the wilderness, and were thereby kept from entering into the promised land. Great miracles were wrought for them both in Egypt and the wilderness; miracles of mercy and of judgment also, by fire, by the earth opening, by fiery serpents, by consuming thousands of them; all which were evidences sufficient to convince them of the wickedness of mistrusting him. But notwithstanding all the wonders both of mercy and of judgment, they were full of pride, murmuring, rebellion, and unbelief; and in this hardened course they continued no less than forty years, until all but two of them, Caleb and Joshua, were consumed. Such were the provocations and temptations of God, that he determined their punishment; the certainty whereof he fixed by an irreversible oath, which is the highest confirmation of vengeance. The matter sworn was, that they should be so far from possessing, that they should not enter into the promised land, ver. 11. “So I swear in my wrath, that they should not enter into my rest.” And if we look forward

to the 18th and 19th verses, we shall find that the apostle lays their exclusion from the promised land absolutely and wholly upon their unbelief. They were guilty of many other sins: they were proved rebellious, murmurers, idolaters; but their unbelief was the root which sent forth all these branches,—it was the fountain from which all these bitter waters flowed; and this being the case, the solemn caution in our text follows very naturally the preceding discourse. “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God.”

In these words we have, 1. An affectionate appellation, “Brethren.” Those unto whom this apostle wrote were his brethren upon a natural account, at least they were his countrymen, he being by birth a Jew; but he here calls them brethren upon a spiritual account, as being interested in the same family of God with himself; and by this appellation he insinuates himself into their affections, that so the caution might be better received. Hereby he likewise obviates any suspicion that might arise in their minds, as if he had hard thoughts of them; and lets them know, that the best of saints had need to be cautioned against the worst of evils. 2. In the words we have a caution expressed: “Take heed.” The original word signifies properly, to see or behold, as that is an act of sense; and to take heed or beware, an act of the mind; so, by an easy translation, first ‘I see,’ and then ‘I take heed.’ The word imports a constant heedfulness and circumspection. 3. You have the persons concerned in the caution, viz. every individual among the Hebrews. “Take heed, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief.” The same expression is used, chap. xii. 15, 16. “Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God.” 4. The thing cautioned against, which is expressed two ways: 1st, In the principle of it, “an evil heart of unbelief;” and, 2dly, In the effects of it, “departing from the living God.” The principle of the evil cautioned against, is “an evil heart of unbelief.” By the ‘heart’ here, we are not to understand

that part of the body commonly so called, nor yet any particular faculty of the soul; but the whole soul, in all its powers and faculties. An evil heart of unbelief, is a very strong expression, and there is certainly more in it than to say, an evil and unbelieving heart. This may be said of the best hearts in this imperfect state. There is no man on earth such a strong and steadfast believer, but he misbelieves ten times for his believing once. An heart of unbelief, then, is a heart that is absolutely under the power of unbelief,—a heart that has unbelief as the habitual and prevailing principle of all its actions. And the expression of an evil heart of unbelief, seems to point out unbelief as the efficient cause of this evil: it renders the heart evil to such a degree, that it departs from the living God. It is a sin of the most malignant influence. It is the root of all apostacy and defection from the profession of the gospel. And if it be inquired, why the apostle calls apostacy from the profession of the gospel a “departing from the living God,” it may be observed, that possibly the Hebrews did not think, that apostacy from Christianity was a departure from the living God. They would plead that they were not turning unto idols or idolatry; but that they were returning, as they thought, to observe the institutions of the living God, which certainly the Jewish institutions once were. But the apostle lets them know, that after the revelation of Christ, and their profession of him, they could not depart from him, without at the same time departing from the living God:—and he here calls God the living God, that he might deter them from the evil he was cautioning them against. If unbelief should prevail so far in them as to make them apostates from the gospel, they would depart from the living God; that is, from the God who lives for ever to take vengeance on them that are backsliders and apostates. This consideration of God being the living God, is full either of comfort or terror to us, according as we are interested in him. If we have his favour and friendship, then it is comfortable to think that He who is our friend

lives for ever; and if we are enemies to him, as all are by nature—or if we are turned to be his enemies after a solemn profession of friendship—let us remember, that “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

Thus, you see, the same promise that drops comfort and sweetness to the godly, drops nothing but gall and wormwood to the wicked.

DOCTRINE.—It concerns the professors of Christianity to take great heed, lest there be in any of them an absolutely prevailing principle of unbelief.

I. I shall mention some things plainly implied in this text and doctrine.

II. Open the nature of unbelief, and show you wherein it consists.

III. Lay down some propositions regarding unbelief, which may further discover its heinous nature and hurtful tendency.

IV. Inquire into that influence which unbelief has upon some professors, to make them apostates from their profession, and so depart from the living God.

Lastly, Apply.

I. I am to mention some things plainly implied in this text and doctrine. These are,

1st, The professors of Christianity need to be stirred up to circumspection, and a godly jealousy over themselves.

Thus the apostle stirs up the Hebrews in our text, and likewise in the twelfth chapter, ver. 15, 16; and he expresses himself much after the same manner to the church at Corinth, 2 Cor. xi. 2, 3. “For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy. For I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.” There is a causeless jealousy and suspicion which some have about their brethren, arising from their own credulous and invidious tempers, which is very hurtful to Christian society. But a holy care and concern about our brethren, discovering

itself in warning, and exhorting, and provoking them to love and good works, is very becoming, both in ministers and private Christians.

Many professors, indeed, take this in bad part; they think themselves too good to have any fears or jealousies entertained of them either by themselves or others. But such persons are proud, high-minded, and fearless; and, for all their confidence, they will fall, when those who fear always stand firm. Therefore, suffer the word of exhortation; take cautions and warnings in good part, and as necessary for you in this dark ensnaring world, though you may be already established in the truth, 2 Pet. i. 12.

2dly, A man may imagine himself to be a true believer in Christ, while unbelief absolutely prevails in his heart. This is necessarily implied in the text. If unbelief reigning in the heart were a thing that presently discovered itself to the person in whom it resides, there would be no need of so much fear, caution, and jealousy about it as the text recommends. But the matter is not so. For though unbelief be the greatest of sins, yet the place of its residence, which is the heart, helps to conceal it, especially from those who have no acquaintance with their hearts. Yea, the hearts of the best are such, that none can discover all that is in them, but he whose prerogative it is to search the hearts, Jer. xvii. 10. Besides, unbelief works inwardly in the powers of the soul, and it may work for a long time before the effects of it be discernible. It is not so with other sins, such as pride, covetousness, and revenge: when any of these prevail in the heart, the effects of them are easily discerned. But unbelief may dwell long in the soul, and be working in the understanding, will, and affections, long before any effects of it are noticed, either by the parties themselves or by others. And hence it is that so many are quite mistaken about their state; like the church of Laodicea, they imagine they are rich, and increased with goods, while in reality they are "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked," Rev. iii. 17.

3dly, Though a principle of unbelief in the heart lies very favourable for concealment, yet it may be discovered, and when discovered may be cast out. This is likewise implied in the apostle's exhortation to the Hebrews. If any of them, upon serious examination, found a prevalent principle of unbelief in their hearts, they were not there-upon to despair, or to think that because they had not the faith of God's elect as yet, therefore they would never obtain it. To think after this manner, is still to harbour the principle of unbelief, and to give way to its sophistical arguments, without admitting the solid reasonings of faith.

4thly, Hence it follows, that it is the duty of every Christian to be much employed in the great work of self-examination, 2 Cor. xiii. 5. This is a duty from which no Christian is exempted, whatever be his station in the world or in the church of Christ. However shining his gifts are, and however high his attainments may be, it is his duty and interest to examine and search his own heart, as well as the weakest and meanest Christian; for it is possible that the root of the matter may not be in him, notwithstanding these goodly appearances; and even though the root of the matter be in him, yet self-examination is necessary for the discovery of those filthy weeds which grow up beside it, and threaten to suppress the precious planting of the Lord in the heart.

II. These things being premised, I proceed to open up the nature of unbelief, and to show you wherein it consists.

1st, In the first place, in order to understand the nature of unbelief, there are two distinctions of it which we must observe: the first of these is into *negative* and *positive* unbelief.

Negative unbelief is, when men have not faith, or do not believe, though they never had the means of grace. Those who do not believe the gospel are called unbelievers or infidels, though they never heard it. So Paul, directing the church of Corinth about their public worship, says, "If therefore the whole church be come together into one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those

that are unlearned, or unbelievers," *i. e.* heathens or pagans, these are said to be unbelievers, though they cannot be charged with an evil heart of unbelief, as it is meant in the text.

Positive unbelief is the sin of those who hear the gospel, and is committed either by refusing to believe the gospel, or by rejecting the faith of it, after we have publicly professed it, and so departing from the living God.

Some discover and express their unbelief, by despising the gospel, and the means of grace to such a degree, as that they will not take on the profession of it; and, like Gallio, "they care for none of these things." Others make a profession of the gospel, and are thereupon admitted into the external privileges, but by and by they are offended; they draw back and apostatize; and so their unbelief is expressed in rejecting the truths of the gospel already received.

The second distinction of unbelief is, into *notional* and *practical*. *Notional* unbelief, or unbelief in the mind, consists in refusing to admit the gospel revelation, as to the truth and necessity of it, or refusing to apply the same in particular to the soul for its salvation. Some, I say, are so bold as to reject the whole gospel revelation, as a cunningly devised fable. The mystery of a crucified Christ appears foolishness to them: they reckon, that men, by a vigorous exertion of the moral powers of their minds, are capable of pleasing God so as to be accepted of him. Now, this is unbelief in the grossest sense; yet there are many such unbelievers in the world.

But then there are others, in whose hearts unbelief resides in a more refined dress. Those give their assent to the whole gospel revelation, as a truth in itself; nay, they approve of it as a thing good in itself and necessary; but they never believe it with particular application to themselves; they will not trust in Christ for their salvation, and they will not believe that the gospel breathes grace and good-will to them in particular. They are either careless and indifferent about the matter, or, if they do inquire,

they stumble at one of two things, either the validity of their claim to embrace Christ, or Christ's willingness to receive them; and those who continue to the end in this way, perish as unbelievers.

Practical unbelief resides in those who profess that they know God, and that they believe in him. Of these the apostle speaks, Tit. i. ult. The pretended faith of such persons does not regulate their hearts and lives. Their lusts and corruptions absolutely prevail against any impressions of God, or the truths of God, that may be upon their minds, so that they are shut up in unbelief; and this is the case of multitudes who hear the gospel.

2dly, For understanding the nature of unbelief, let it be observed, that the root of it is the original corruption and depravity of human nature. The corrupt heart is the seat of unbelief. It is hatched there, and there it is nourished and strengthened. For, as "with the heart man believeth unto righteousness," so with the heart he misbelieves or mistrusts to his own destruction.

Now, that we may see how much there is in the nature of man now totally corrupted, to produce and strengthen his unbelief of the gospel when it is proposed to him, these things following may be considered.

1. There is ignorance and darkness upon the mind, 1 Cor. ii. 14. The natural man—that is, the man who has all and nothing more than what can be derived from the first Adam—does not discern the truths of the gospel, as they are an expression of the holiness, righteousness, and wisdom of God. He does not see their consistency with the glory of God, nor their tendency to his own good; and, therefore, in his judgment, the manifold wisdom of God is foolishness. Now, how is it possible that he should believe the truths of the gospel, while he apprehends them to be the very reverse of what they really are.

2. From this ignorance of the gospel, there arise many prejudices against it. Particularly, there are prejudices, 1st, Against the mysteries of the gospel, unfathomable by the natural understanding. Now, unbelief is the spring

and source of these prejudices, and is the cause of men's rejecting these mysteries, as absurd and unintelligible. But the truth is, it is impossible for a man to be a Christian without admitting of mysteries; that is, believing truths, not because he comprehends them, but because God has revealed them, who certainly would never impose a falsehood upon any of his reasonable creatures. Nevertheless, the prejudices of some against the mysteries of Christianity are so strong, that they reject the whole system, and betake themselves to the religion of nature, as better adapted to their capacities; and yet there are many things in nature, and in the religion of nature, which the acutest understanding cannot account for: nay, there is such an analogy betwixt natural and revealed religion, that there is scarcely any considerable difficulty casts up in the latter, but a difficulty some way analogous to it is found in the former, and which is equally puzzling to our reason to account for it.

2dly, Against the worship of the gospel. There is a purity and spirituality in it, void of all outward pomp and ceremony, that the vain mind of man cannot endure.

Man is naturally fond of a visible object in worship: hence sprung the idolatry of the world,—some worshipping the work of God's hands, as the sun, moon, and stars; others worshipping the work of their own hands, as the Israelites with their golden calf. The Jews had such a pompous service, there was such a splendour and glory in their worship visible to the eye, that they could not endure the simplicity of the Christian institution. The pagans reproachfully upbraided the Christians, because they had no temples, nor altars, nor splendid ceremonies. Hence Christianity was to the Jews a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks foolishness; neither of them believed it.

3dly, Against the precepts of the gospel. They are too strict for them. A religion that would give scope to men's corrupt lusts and passions, and allow them to live as they please, would soon get a vast number of believers. But the Christian religion calls for the curbing all these vicious

lusts and passions which men indulge themselves in, to the dishonour of God, to the ruin of their souls, and to the hurt of the society whereof they are members. It enjoins men to be holy in all manner of conversation; and this the greatest part of mankind cannot endure: hence they reject the gospel, and perish in their unbelief.

3. There is a rebelliousness in the will, and this arises from the prejudices against the gospel that have been conceived in the mind. Hence our Saviour complains of the Jews, Matt. xxiii. 37; John v. 40. "And ye will not come unto me that ye may have life." He does not by this expression intend only that natural unwillingness which is in all men to come to him, and believe in him; but he points at that particular obstinacy and averseness which was in their wills, arising from their hatred of him and his doctrine: hence they not only did not believe on him—which might have been charged on their natural impotency—but they put forth a positive act of their wills in refusing and rejecting him. And upon this account, the guilt of men's unbelief is absolutely resolved into their wills. The truths of the gospel are laid before them in their nature, use, and end, with the greatest plainness and evidence; and the authority of the great God, requiring their belief of them, is also urged, and they are not only unwilling to believe them, but, by a direct and positive act of their wills, they absolutely refuse to be concerned with them.

4thly, There is an alienation of the affections from God and his truths; and this part of the corrupt nature strengthens unbelief very much: for, where there is not the love of the truth, there will never be a receiving of it. Men's affections are, by sin, turned off their proper centre, and are now fixed upon the creatures and their sinful lusts; and when they see that the tendency of the gospel is to part them and their beloved lusts, presently they are offended. They refuse to believe it, as being that which crosses the main current of their affections. The most endearing promises and invitations expressed in the gospel,

make not the least softening impression upon their hearts, which are hardened and wedded to their lusts.

5thly, There is in all men by nature an impotency to believe. "No man can come unto me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him;" *i. e.* 'No man can, by any power or ability of his own, believe on me.' By reason of the fall, we are in worse case for religion than anything else. The natural man may make essays towards several duties, as praying, reading, hearing, communicating; but as for the great duty of believing on the Son of God, he can just do nothing at all; and therefore it is no wonder that unbelief prevails so much in the world. However, this impotency to believe and to do good, is our sin, as well as our misery; it is criminal before God, for he made man upright.

III. I go on, in the next place, to lay down some propositions concerning unbelief, which may further discover its heinous nature and hurtful tendency. And, 1st, Unbelief is a sin of a very old date. It does, if I may so speak, claim the pre-eminence among other sins, in regard of its antiquity, for it seems to have been the first sin of our first parents. The temptation was offered to faith. "Yea, hath God said" (says the devil). At this Eve staggered: she became dizzy; and upon that arm she fell and broke it to pieces. The temptation expressly contradicts the divine threatening. God had said, that in the day they ate the forbidden fruit, they should surely die. Satan says, Ye shall not die: and so that kind of unbelief, which has the divine threatenings for its object, and is commonly called presumption, is likewise of an ancient date, and derives its origin from the father of lies.

Thus unbelief early entered the world, and the world was shut up under it. Other sins are the causes for which God imprisons men, but that they are held fast he makes unbelief the jailer.

2dly, Unbelief is a sin productive of all other sins. It is like the fountain, and all other sins are the streams. While others slay their thousands, it slays its ten thou-

sands. It kills shoals of Adam's children, and lays them in heaps upon heaps, as Samson did the Philistines. It fills the church and the world with all sorts of sinners; and it crowds the pit with sinners that shall never be released. As faith is the fountain of all holy obedience; so unbelief is the fountain of all disobedience. The pride, the rebellion, and murmurings of Israel in the wilderness, flowed all from unbelief, as the apostle teaches, Heb. chap. iii.; and the more or less of unbelief that is in any of the just, so much the more or less shall their disobedience be. It is the different degrees and workings of unbelief that make some openly profane, some hypocrites or formalists, some mere moralists, and others apostates.

Thus, whatever be the denomination of sinners living under the gospel, the denomination of unbelievers agrees to them all; for, though the profane person cannot be called a moralist, nor the mere moralist called a profane person, yet each of them may be called an unbeliever. Unbelief is the spring of all turnings aside, either to the right or left hand: therefore, in all your searchings and self-examinations, be sure not to forget or overlook unbelief, else you will do nothing at all. If it be undiscovered and undisturbed in the heart, though you could purge yourselves of all other sins, yet it would presently make your hearts like a cage of unclean birds; it would fill it with all manner of abominations.

But to illustrate this a little further, I will condescend on some particular sins, which flow directly and immediately from unbelief as their fountain.

1st, The great, the heinous sin of rejecting Jesus Christ offered in the gospel, flows from unbelief. Thus the prophet Isaiah, when complaining of the unsuccessfulness of the means of grace in his days, resolves it into unbelief as the cause of it, Isa. liii. 1; and the apostle Paul, Heb. iv. 2. tells the Hebrews, that the gospel was preached unto their fathers, as well as unto them, but did not profit them; and he assigns the very same reason for it with the prophet Isaiah, viz. their unbelief: "The word not being mixed

with faith in them that heard it." Wherefore did the Jews reject the Messiah when he came to them? how was it that they regarded neither his doctrine, nor his divine mission, notwithstanding the indisputable evidences he gave of the truth of both? Why, all this proceeded from an absolutely prevailing principle of unbelief in their hearts. Yea, we find, Matt. xiii., that when our Lord came to his own countrymen, and spoke and did works among them as never man did, their unbelief came to such a height, that there was a kind of embargo laid upon him; and he was in a manner discouraged from doing any mighty works among them; verse ult. "And he did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief." He did some mighty works; but their unbelief flew so full in the face of them, that he saw it needless to do any more such works. Whence proceeds the deism of the age, the rejecting revealed religion, and resting upon the light of nature? Why, it is all owing to the prevalence of unbelief. Whence is it that the greatest part of the hearers of the gospel, though they do not openly reject it, yet they never cordially receive it,—they never concern themselves about it more than they never had heard such things? Why, all proceeds from the same fountain, ever reigning unbelief. Now, my brethren, the not receiving or rejecting Jesus Christ offered in the gospel, is the most heinous of sins: there is nothing so provoking to God: and he has testified his displeasure against it, by inflicting the most terrible judgments upon those who are guilty of it: the Jews are witnesses hereof to this very day. Now, if rejecting the gospel be such a great sin, what shall we think of unbelief, which is the undoubted parent of it?

2dly, Presumption is one of the wicked progeny of unbelief. I observed before, that the devil, in seducing the innocent pair in paradise, expressly contradicted the divine threatening of death, and made them to presume upon it, as if there had been nothing in it. Whence is it that sinners presume upon the general mercy of God, saying, they shall have peace, though they walk according to the ima-

ginations of their own hearts? whence is it that they presume upon his patience: that, because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore they believe that it will never be executed? why, all this abominable presumption proceeds from their unbelief of his justice and holiness, by which he cannot but hate and revenge sin upon the impenitent; and likewise from unbelief of that special mercy in Christ, by which alone it is that he can pardon sinners.

3dly, Despair is likewise the native product of unbelief. Cain, Saul, and Judas, and many others, through the prevalency of unbelief, have been driven to despair. Any faith or belief that such persons have, is absolutely and immoveably fixed upon the justice of God, and the terrible threatenings of the law; and that, in the eye of heaven, is rank unbelief; and the issue of it, which is the mercy of God, proves it to be so. Now, despair is a dreadful sin, for it is levelled against the free grace of God, which is the remedy of all sin. What, then, shall we think of unbelief from which it flows?

4thly, Apostacy from the profession of the gospel is one of the bitter fruits of unbelief. This the apostle tells us plainly. "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God," Heb. iii. 12. As unbelief prevails with some absolutely to refuse a compliance with the gospel, so it prevails with others to reject it, after it has been received and professed, which is a most heinous sin. Apostates and backsliders are the abhorred of the Lord, therefore take heed unto yourselves; for though you have made, and continue to make profession of the gospel, yet if there be an absolutely prevailing principle of unbelief in your hearts, it will work you up at last into a forsaking of that profession.

5thly, Murmuring under cross events of providence, flows likewise from the prevalence of unbelief. The conduct of the Israelites in the wilderness, is a plain proof of the power of unbelief upon the heart, to make it fret at the divine dealings. They were never reduced to any

straits, but they fell a-murmuring against God, and his servant Moses: they moved doubts and jealousies about the power of God, saying, "Can God furnish a table in the wilderness? can he give bread also? can he provide flesh for his people?" Psal. lxxviii. 19, 20. "Take heed, then, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief:" for if unbelief has the ascendant in the soul, and be allowed to judge concerning the conduct of providence, it will give in a verdict to the dishonour of God, and to the discouragement of the Christian. It is no wonder indeed, that those in whom unbelief absolutely prevails, should be quite dissatisfied with every part of the divine conduct: for we find the saints themselves, under the prevalence of remaining unbelief, scarce able to bear some parts of the divine conduct towards them. Jacob says, "All these things are against me;" and David in his haste said, "That all men are liars." Samuel, Gad, and Nathan, the prophets of the Lord, not excepted. The remains of unbelief threw so much mist, dust, and darkness upon their minds, that they could not see the kindness and good-will of God towards them in his dispensations.

3. Unbelief is a common sin, and therefore the less regarded among men, but nothing the less provoking to God. It was the common sin among the Jews, but they did not regard it; they would not be convinced of it; but the universality of it was an aggravation in God's sight, as appeared from the event, when the whole nation was involved in the same punishment, even as they had involved themselves in the same guilt. A disease ceases not to be mortal, because it is epidemic; nay, it is the more dangerous. Unbelief, then, is a great sin, and it is so much the greater that multitudes are involved in the guilt of it. It is the great prevailing sin among the hearers of the gospel at this day: they believe not the report; they refuse to credit his word of grace. Some of them are guilty of very heinous sins; sins that give great scandal and offence, and sometimes they are prevailed upon to think of them: but as for the sin of unbelief, in which they have

lived, and which has lived and lodged in them all their days, and which is the fountain of all their other sins, they never notice it, notwithstanding all they hear concerning the heinous nature and hurtful tendency of it. My brethren, there is utterly a fault in you in this matter. You have not your senses rightly exercised to discern betwixt good and evil, else you would not think so lightly of unbelief. And let me tell you, that, think as slightly of unbelief as you will, the Judge of all the earth thinks otherwise of it; and, as an evidence thereof, he has said, that "he who believeth not shall be damned;" and when he comes in flaming fire at the latter day, it is to take vengeance on unbelievers.

4. Unbelief is a sin which casts the greatest dishonour upon God. The unbelieving man or woman charges the Most High with falsehood, and makes the God of truth a liar, 1 John v. 10. God has given his record concerning his Son, which is a most certain truth, and is therefore proposed unto faith; and when we refuse to give faith to it, we call it a lie, and so fix falsehood upon the recorder. Nay, my brethren, the nature and tendency of unbelief is to make void the scheme of salvation, and to frustrate the whole counsel of God in that matter; for the gospel, which is the alone mean of salvation, is, in the depths of sovereign wisdom, so contrived, that without faith applying it to the soul, God can neither get the glory he proposes by it, nor can the sinner get any good by it. Indeed, if the case were thus, that the merits of Christ, or the preaching of the gospel should save, though we never believed, never improved it, or walked any way answerable to it, then truly unbelief would not be such a terrible thing as we represent it. But the matter is by no means thus. According to the present state of things, there is such a close connection betwixt faith and the glory of God, betwixt faith and the salvation of the sinner, that unbelief, which is directly opposite unto faith, must be that sin, which, above all others, robs God of his whole revenue of glory, and robs the sinner of all his salvation.

5. Unbelief is one of the sins which God punishes with the most awful judgments. The church of the Jews, before and after our Saviour, is a pregnant proof hereof. The generation in the wilderness were, for their unbelief, absolutely excluded from entering into the promised land. God entered a caveat against them, with no less solemnity than that of an oath. They were doomed to pass a miserable and inglorious life for forty years in the wilderness, and then their carcasses were to fall to dung it. And as for that generation which filled up the measure of their fathers, in rejecting the Messiah, you know what was their fate. Our Lord told them of it, and it came to pass not long after his ascension. Their whole polity, civil and ecclesiastical, was overturned; their city was besieged; their temple destroyed, insomuch that one stone of it was not left upon another; and all this because of their unbelief. Therefore I say to you, as in Rom. xi. 20, "Well, because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith. Be not high-minded, but fear."

6. Unbelief is that sin, which, above all others, excludes multitudes of the hearers of the gospel from the rest promised therein. Mark xvi. 16, "He that believeth shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be damned." As faith is the precise point upon which our salvation turns, so unbelief is the precise point upon which our condemnation turns.

Moreover, when the Lord comes in flaming fire, he is to take vengeance upon them that obey not the gospel. Now, what is the obedience that the gospel requires? Why, it is the obedience of faith; it is believing. This is the only obedience which the gospel requires; and those who refuse to obey it are unbelievers; and as such, God will judge and condemn them at the last day.

It is a sin against the remedy of all sins. And what is this remedy? It is the blood of Christ, or free grace. Unbelief is levelled directly against them; so that the unbeliever cannot, or rather will not be saved. Yea, whence is it that the sin against the Holy Ghost is said to be un-

pardonable? is it from any defect in the blood of Christ? is it because there is not enough of grace and mercy in God to pardon such a heinous sin? By no means. It flows from the unbelief and impiety of those that are guilty of this sin. There is no sin so great, but God will pardon it, upon the sinner's believing in Christ and turning from it; but the nature of this sin is such, that the sinner, wilfully, deliberately, and maliciously rejects Christ and all the salvation purchased by him. So that the unpardonableness of this sin is absolutely owing to the sinner, and not to the God of all grace.

7. Unbelief is the great disturber of the saints' peace and comfort while they are in this world. Saints, though they have not evil hearts of unbelief, yet they have unbelief in their hearts in a greater or lesser degree; and this is the procuring cause of all their wilderness provocations, and consequently the procuring cause of all their wilderness tribulations. I know not indeed but that God may sometimes afflict his people out of mere sovereignty; and I think there is something like it in Job's case. Observe what the Lord says of him to Satan:—"Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in all the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God and escheweth evil? and still he holdeth his integrity, although thou movedst me against him, to destroy him without cause." Howbeit, if there be such a thing as God's afflicting his people out of mere sovereignty, it happens very seldom; for he "does not afflict willingly." There is generally some particular transgression for which he contends with them; and that particular transgression is either unbelief itself, or some of its fruits. Nay, were it not for unbelief, the saints might have a very heaven here upon earth. But unbelief, though it cannot break the peace, (for he that made it maintains it,) yet it frequently darkens the evidence of it; and this throws them into great distress. It is the prevalence of unbelief that makes them frequently cry out, "Has he forgotten to be gracious? is his mercy clean gone? does his promise fail for

evermore?" It is unbelief that fills them with jealousies against God, as if in some dispensations he designed their ruin, when he really aims at their good. "All these things are against me," says Jacob. "All men are liars," says David. Thus you see it is a great enemy to the saints. No wonder that they complain heavily of their unbelieving hearts, for they are the source of much sin and much sorrow.

8. Unbelief is such a sin that the oath of God is engaged against it. He speaks against other sins in severe threatenings; but the oath of God is engaged against no sin but unbelief, Heb. iii. 18. The murmurings and rebellions of Israel in the wilderness were very provoking sins; but that which gave them such a height of provocation, that God entered a caveat against them with no less solemnity than that of an oath, was their relation to unbelief.

Thus, my brethren, if you continue in unbelief, you shall be as really excluded from the heavenly Canaan, as the murmuring Israelites were from the earthly Canaan. It shall not be in your power to enter into it; for the oath of God stands as a bar in your way.

9. I observe, that for as horrid a notion as we generally have of atheism, it is but unbelief in its highest degree. An atheist is one who does not believe a God, a providence, and a future state: and is not such an one an unbeliever? so that a common and ordinary unbeliever among the hearers of the gospel, is a sinner of the same kind with a professed atheist. He has the same principle of sin in him; and were it not for the divine restraint, that principle would be wound up to the height of atheism.

As people do not become vicious in their practice all of a sudden, so neither do any become immediately debauched in their principles. They proceed from lesser to greater: they inure themselves to a disbelief of the promises of the gospel; then they disbelieve the threatenings of the law against sin, and this necessarily leads them to a disbelief of the Lawgiver, and then they commence atheists: they say, at least they wish in their hearts there were no God.