

SERMON XII.

THE NATURE OF UNBELIEF OPENED UP, AND ITS PERNICIOUS INFLUENCE UPON PROFESSORS OF THE GOSPEL 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.”

[Second Sermon on this Text.]

THE method proposed was, in the first place, I. To mention some things plainly implied in the text and doctrine. II. To open the nature of unbelief, and show you wherein it consists. III. To lay down some propositions regarding unbelief, which may further discover its heinous nature and hurtful tendency. IV. To inquire into that influence which unbelief has upon some professors, to make them apostates from their profession, and so depart from the living God; and, Lastly, To apply.

The three first of these heads have been fully considered already. I now proceed, in the fourth place,

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

1. Let it be observed concerning such professors, that unbelief, having always been the prevailing principle in their hearts, they never had the root of the matter in them.

They never had anything of Christianity, but what might be lost as easily as it was obtained. They never went far-

ther in it, that what might well enough consist with an absolutely prevailing principle of unbelief. As for the life of Christianity, those who have attained unto it, can never fall from it totally or finally; for unbelief, as to its absolute prevalency, is subdued in them, and a contrary principle is planted in their souls, 1 John iii. 9. But as for an outward profession of Christianity, which people maintain by a form of godliness, they may fall from it; yea, they cannot well continue long in it, while unbelief absolutely prevails in their hearts; for that principle is always upon the growing hand; it is rising higher and higher, until it come to such a height, that the person throws off the very profession of Christianity.

2. Unbelief prevailing in the heart, gives the loose, as it were, to all other corrupt lusts and affections that are there. Unbelief has the throne in their hearts: there it sits as king: all the other lusts are its servants, which it commands to go or come as it pleases. Hence, though other sins, as love of this present world, or love to carnal ease, may be the proximate and immediate causes of apostacy, yet it is unbelief that engenders these sins in the heart, and strengthens them to such a degree, that they throw off that profession of religion which is like to be dangerous to them. Demas forsook Paul, for the love of this present world. But had Demas had a principle of faith in him, it would have subdued his love of this present world, and would have made him look for a better and more enduring inheritance in the heavens. But instead of that, he had a reigning principle of unbelief, which gave the loose to those and all his other lusts, that were like to be starved, if he had continued in the profession of Christianity.

3. Unbelief casts all noble and generous principles out of the heart. It dispirits a man, and makes him a downright coward, so that he dare not go forward in the way of religion, but draws back. Hence, in Rev. xxi. 8, the fearful and unbelieving are ranked together, as being near akin: fear is the child, and unbelief is the parent. The

fearful are those who, having entered upon the way of religion, are so scared at the difficulties and hardships casting up in it, that they dare not go forward. They think it impossible for them ever to get safe to the end of the way; and so they judge it best to draw back in time.

We may judge of the nature and effects of unbelief, by comparing it with its opposite grace, which is faith. Now faith, you know, is the most bold and courageous of all the graces. It makes a man like another Samson, both for strength and courage. The saints of old, through faith, "subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens." But unbelief is a base coward: it makes a man to run when none pursues him; to fear, where there is no cause of fear. Faith removes the mountain, but unbelief raises it; yea, it imagines that to be a mountain which is but a molehill. Unbelief says there is a lion in the streets, and therefore it is not safe to go out; but faith ventures out upon the word of promise: "Thou shalt tread upon the lion and the adder." Unbelief makes such a report of the good land to the man, as intimidates and frightens him. It tells him of such rocks and mountains, of such lions and leopards in the way, as drives him back after he designed to set forward. But when unbelief whispers any such reports in the saints' ears to discourage them, valiant faith steps in, like Caleb of old, and stills them, saying, "Let us go up at once and possess it, for we are well able to overcome it," Numb. xiii. 30.

4. Unbelief centres the soul upon earthly things, and thereby influences it unto an apostacy from Christianity, when the profession of it is any way incompatible with these things. As faith raises the soul above earthly things, and opens it a passage unto the holiest of all, where it sees a portion suitable to its nature, and so bears it up under all the worldly crosses, losses, and discouragements that may attend the profession of Christianity; so, on the other

hand, unbelief confines the soul to earthly things as its portion. It cannot look upwards to God in Christ. It cannot carry the soul within the veil. The unbeliever's treasure lies in the earth, and therefore, when his profession of Christianity interferes with it, no wonder that he throws it off.

Having finished the doctrinal part of this subject, I now proceed to the application.

First, then, this doctrine may be improved by way of lamentation over an unbelieving world, unto whom the gospel is preached. Alas! "Who hath believed our report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?" The word is preached, the word is heard; but it is not mixed with faith in them that hear, and therefore it cannot profit them. The gospel is the same now that it was in ancient times; but the temper and disposition of the hearers are not what they have been. An indifference and lukewarmness have seized the spirits of the most part of our professors. The good old doctrine of the cross of Christ, the doctrine preached by the apostles, the doctrine preached by our reformers, is now become so old, that with many it is quite out of date, and it has no savour with them. They have itching ears, are fond of new speculations and fancies; they seek amusement, but not edification; and so the simple, plain, and undisguised preaching of the gospel is foolishness with them.

Nay, infidelity and atheism prevail so much, that bold attempts are made to sap and undermine the foundations of revealed religion. The doctrine of the cross seems to the worshippers of reason, a "cunningly devised fable," and an imposition upon the world. To others, it is a lovely song, which, though it make some impression, yet that impression presently wears off, and they are nothing the wiser for it. Vice and immorality, the native product of unbelief, overflows all its banks. The greatest part believe not the promises of the gospel, nor the threatenings of it; therefore they go on, Jehu-like, in spite of all rebukes, and in spite of the most awful dispensations of



- Providence, whereof there are not a few at this day. This is the case of the present generation, and it is their unbelief that makes it so.

And what is most to be lamented is, that though unbelief be the crying sin among the hearers of the gospel at this day, yet they will not be convinced of it. People will not see it to be a sin, at least to be such a heinous sin, as the Spirit of God in the Scripture represents it. Yea, it is much to be doubted, if any among you have been prevailed on to look into your own hearts, for the abominable idol, notwithstanding all you have heard about it. However, if any of you be destroyed by it, it is not for want of warning.

Secondly, This doctrine may be improved by way of caution, trial, and examination. 1st, You who are professors, I would have you take the watch-word in the text: "Take heed, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief." You may go the round of religious duties,—you may pray in secret, and in your families,—you may read, hear, and sit down at the Lord's table,—and yet there may be a dead fly which will cause all this ointment of yours to send forth a stinking savour;—I mean, the evil heart of unbelief,—that will spoil, that will putrefy all your duties, so that God will not be able to bear them. Neither think that your long standing in a profession is a sufficient evidence that you have not an evil heart of unbelief; for unbelief being lodged in the heart, may be concealed in it for a long time, and may be working very powerfully though you perceive it not. 2dly, Real believers, you are also concerned in this matter; for, though you have not an evil heart of unbelief, yet there is much unbelief in your hearts. None of you believes so strongly, so steadily, and constantly as you should do. If you think you do, it is a plain symptom that you have no faith at all. Those who complain most of their unbelieving hearts, are the best believers. That man understood the nature of faith, and had a great deal of it, who said, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."

Wherefore, believers, I caution you against unbelief. Beware of the very first motions of it. Listen not to this whisperer, lest he separate betwixt you and your best friend. It is a sin of the most malignant influence of any whatsoever; therefore the least degree of it is dangerous.

Quest. But how shall we distinguish betwixt unbelief in the heart, and an evil heart of unbelief? This question I would solve for the sake of real believers, for they are the only persons who inquire into these matters; and when they feel unbelief working in their hearts, they are apt to suspect that they are utterly destitute of saving faith, and that they have an evil heart of unbelief.

1. In the general, let it be observed, that there is unbelief in the heart of the strongest and steadiest believers, so long as they are in the world. But the evil heart of unbelief subsists only in such as never yet believed unto the saving of their souls. We must distinguish betwixt doing a thing in unbelief, and doing it not without a mixture of unbelief. It is one of the adorable depths of the divine wisdom, that the sanctification of believers is not perfected until death. Hence, though they be sanctified in every part, soul, body, and spirit, yet they are completely sanctified in no part. They are split into flesh and spirit—into an old man and a new man: there is a piece of remaining corruption to oppose every grace of the Spirit. Hence there is a remainder of unbelief to oppose the actings of faith; there is a remainder of hypocrisy to oppose the grace of sincerity; so that the strongest believer must cry, with the man in the gospel, for help against his unbelief, and with the apostles, Luke xvii. 5. "Lord, Increase our faith." But the question still returns, viz. How shall I know whether the unbelief in my heart be the absolutely prevailing principle there, or only such a remainder of it as is consistent with a gracious state thereafter.

2. When unbelief absolutely prevails in the heart, the person has no sense or feeling of it; whereas a gracious person feels the workings of unbelief in his heart, com-

plaints of them, and mourns over them before the Lord. It is indeed possible that hypocrites, when they take a religious fit, and have their affections moved, may complain of unbelief as if they really felt it. But sure I am, a solid and abiding sense and feeling of the workings of unbelief will be found in none in whom it absolutely prevails; for this feeling is the very fruit of faith, and cannot be where there is no faith, no more than smoke can be where there is no fire, or motion where there is no life.

3. Where unbelief absolutely prevails in the heart, it meets with no opposition; whereas the man who has a principle of faith, constantly opposes, struggles, and fights against the remainder of unbelief in his heart. Hence the apostle says, "The flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary the one to the other," Gal. v. 17. Abraham was so great a believer, that he was honoured with the title of the father of the faithful: his faith was made the pattern of the faith of the church in all ages; yet in the promise of a son to him he struggled with unbelief; for it is said, that "against hope he believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations." His unbelief flew in the face of the promise, and produced very strong reasonings against the completion of it, viz. his own advanced years, and the deadness of Sarah's womb. But his faith not only opposed but overcame the reasonings of unbelief; and the victory of faith was so much the more glorious, that it was over such a powerful antagonist as unbelief, Rom. iv. 18, 19, 20. Therefore, my brethren, if there be a principle in your souls that struggles and fights against the workings of unbelief, and that not by fits and starts, but habitually and constantly, it is no other than a principle of faith, and consequently unbelief does not absolutely prevail over you. Do not you sometimes feel unbelief rising against the promises of God, and against the providence of God; and, in that case, are you exercised as Abraham was, hoping against hope, and believing over the belly of unbelief, crying to the Lord that he would help your unbelief, and increase

your faith: are you saying with Job, "Though he should slay me, yet will I trust in him?" That man, you see, resolves to fight against unbelief to the very last drop of his blood; as if he had said, The Lord's hand is very sore out against me, and unbelief triumphs over me, saying, where is his mercy, where is his promise? The dispensations of his providence are a downright contradiction to it, but I will not yield it; I will hang by my God; yea, though he should put forth his hand and slay me outright, yet will I die in the faith of his promise.

4. When unbelief absolutely prevails in the heart, there is no abiding love to Jesus Christ in it: whereas, when a man has a principle of faith, it worketh by love, both to the Head and to the members, notwithstanding the remains of unbelief. Peter was a believer in Christ, and consequently a lover of Christ; and though unbelief did not prevail absolutely over him, so as to expel his faith and love totally, yet it prevailed very far, and would have prevailed to the last degree, had it not been Christ's prayer on his behalf, that his faith might not fail, Luke xxii. 31, 32. Now, this man's denial of his Master did not flow from his want of faith in him as the Messiah; it flowed not from a hatred of him, nor yet from an absolute want of love to him; but it flowed from the weakness of his faith and love, and the strength of his remaining unbelief. His faith and love were habitually stronger than his unbelief; but in that hour of temptation unbelief had the ascendant; yet it did not keep its place long; for Christ, by looking to him, looked his unbelief out of countenance: and as for the sincerity of his love, he appeals to the Searcher of hearts: "Lord, thou knowest all things, thou knowest that I love thee."

Examine yourselves, then, my brethren, in this matter. If you feel in your hearts an abiding principle of love to Christ, whereby you esteem him, desire him, and delight in him above all things, you may be satisfied, that unbelief does not absolutely prevail in you, but that you have the faith of God's elect.

5. When unbelief absolutely prevails in the heart, the man's heart is altogether impure, and the man's conversation is disorderly, and not as becometh the gospel; whereas, when a man has a principle of faith, it purifies his heart, and regulates his life according to the laws of Christ. What faith applies for this end is the blood of Christ, and it is always effectual; for "the blood of his Son Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin." Now, a pure heart is the only foundation of a pure and undefiled walk; it is only those that are thus purified that are capable of it. Hence the charge, to maintain good works, is laid upon those who have believed in God, Tit. iii. 8. It is true, indeed, the believer's walk is not without blemishes; he sometimes stumbles and falls deep into the mire, as Peter did; but then he does not lie still there; nay, he rises up again, and runs to the fountain for cleansing. Neither is this stumbling habitual and customary to him: it is occasioned at times by the force of temptation from Satan and the world without, or the remains of unbelief within. He is not himself, when he makes these stumbles.

But, as to others, there is in them unbelief absolutely prevailing; their hearts are altogether loathsome and defiled; they are crammed full of unmortified lusts, which, like soldiers from hell, quarter upon them, and are all going over other. There is no contrary principle brought in either to quell them or expel them, and so they just do as they please; even as when there was no king in Israel, every man did what was right in his own eyes. Now, this impure and disorderly heart cannot fail to produce an impure and disorderly walk. He in whom unbelief absolutely prevails, can never be a habitually tender walker. He may indeed have a form of godliness: he may do some good works; I mean, good as to the matter of them, being commanded of God. He may likewise abstain from gross sins; but the habitual temper of his soul, and tenor of his life, can never be as becomes the gospel. Try yourselves by this mark. The tree is known by its fruit. If you be real believers, your faith will purify your life as

well as your hearts. You will be diligent, constant, and universal in your endeavours after holiness.

6. Though people may hold on in a profession for a time, while unbelief absolutely prevails in their hearts, yet, in a day of trial, this bitter root will discover itself; whereas those who have the faith of God's operation, hold fast their profession to the end, whatever their trials be. Christ records it to the honour of the church of Smyrna, that she held fast his name, and had not denied his faith, even in those days wherein Antipas his faithful martyr was slain among them, Rev. ii. 13. Their faith had stood the trial of the fire of persecution; and it was not found reprobate silver, but declared to be genuine. But where unbelief absolutely prevails, it dispirits a man for trials, makes him faint and draw back in the day of adversity. Like the sons of Ephraim, who, though they were armed and carrying bows, turned back in the day of battle, Psal. lxxviii. 9.

Quest. But what shall we say, when unbelief prevails so far, as to make a person not only doubt of the promises of God, but to call in question the very fundamental principles of religion, as the being and attributes of God, and the truth and authority of the Scriptures? Can unbelief so far prevail against a real believer? I answer, Yea, it may. We have heard of gracious persons thus exercised. Unbelief has set so strongly against them, that they have been like to raze the very foundations. Did not unbelief prevail to such a degree over the Psalmist, that he was almost turned atheist. The words of his unbelief were: "Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency; for all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning," Psal. lxxiii. 13, 14. Yet this man was a great believer, as appears from the issue of the temptation. Hence I say, 1st, That when unbelief prevails thus far over a believer, his faith is not thereby expelled; it is only kept under, and its activity is restrained. It is in that case like a spark of fire buried under ashes, so that it does not send forth either heat or

light, but still is alive, and when the ashes are scattered it appears. So, when this mist, smoke, and ashes of unbelief are scattered by the blowings of the Spirit, the principle of faith appears like the sun from under a cloud. 2dly, I say, that oftentimes they are believers not of a middle stature, but of the first rank, whom the Lord thus exercises. Such strong assaults of unbelief, are so far from being inconsistent with the state of a believer, that they are generally made upon the strongest believers. Pirates generally seize upon the ships that are most richly laden. The more faith that a man has, the greater eyesore is he to Satan; and he will be sure to employ all his power, and all his policy, against him. Besides, whom the Lord designs for great service and great sufferings, he prepares them for the same, by sore conflicts with Satan and the unbelieving heart. Witness the apostle Paul. 3dly, I say, Those sore assaults of unbelief are, in the end, turned to the believer's good and advantage. The trees of God's Eden take the deeper root after such sore shakings. When Asaph went to the sanctuary of God, he got clearer views of God's providence, with respect to the wicked, than ever he had before: "Then did I see their end; surely thou didst set them in slippery places," &c. And this faith and confidence in God as his God, became more firm and steadfast than ever it did before. It is really surprising to see the difference betwixt his frame of spirit in the 10th and 14th verses, and in the 23d, 24th, and 25th verses of the chapter. In the former, he is in the very heat of the battle with unbelief, and he fairly gets the fall, which makes him cry out that religion is a vain thing: but when we come down to the 23d verse, we find him get to his feet again; and behold, he is speaking not only like one that had faith, but like one that had the assurance of faith: "Nevertheless I am continually with thee," &c. Strange! is this the man who a little before was calling religion a vain thing? Surely his fall has made him to stand the more firm: his shaking has rooted him: the furnace has purged him, and his faith is come forth pure as gold.

And now let me apply this doctrine by way of exhortation. "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief."

1. Consider, that unbelief is a clandestine enemy, that may hide itself not only in your house, but in your heart, while you are not aware. This enemy may be living in you, and working in you, when you know it not. "Therefore take heed, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief." "Examine your own selves; prove your own selves, whether you be in the faith."

2. "Take heed, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief;" for it will turn all that you do into sin, and so spoil the acceptance both of your persons and performances. "Whatsoever is not of faith, is sin;" and "without faith it is impossible to please God." Unbelief will turn your prayers and praises, your reading, your hearing and communicating, all into sin. It will make them all an abomination unto the Lord. The proud hypocrite and self-justifying person never performs a duty, but he presently marks God his debtor for it: not remembering, that for every one of these duties God marks him a debtor to his law, to his justice, to his wrath, and all because they are done in unbelief.

3. Take heed of the evil heart of unbelief; for it separates betwixt Christ and you. It stands betwixt you and him; and so long as it prevails absolutely, you the sinner, and he the Saviour, will never meet. Therefore, as you regard your souls, beware of unbelief. For though you may be saved from your unbelief, yet you will never be saved in your unbelief.

4. The solemn ordinance now near in view, calls you to take the caution in the text. Communicants, "Take heed, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief." If unbelief absolutely prevail in your hearts, you are enemies to Christ, and so have nothing to do with that feast which he has prepared for his friends. You can never expect the Master's welcome; you can never expect comfort or establishment to your souls by this ordinance, if

you are yet in unbelief. Nay, you will "eat and drink judgment to yourselves."

By way of Direction.

1. Be convinced of the greatness of the sin of unbelief. Look upon it as that sin which, above all others, is most dishonouring to God, and hurtful to your own souls; for it is the ruin of the hearers of the gospel, that they do not believe unbelief to be a sin, at least such a heinous one as we have represented it.

2. Be much in self-examination. Go down to the chambers of your hearts, and ransack every corner of them for unbelief; and when you have examined yourselves with all the strictness you are capable of, beg God that he would search and try you, that he would find out this action of unbelief in your hearts, and stone it out before your eyes.

3. Be much in prayer to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that he would help your unbelief, and increase your frequent application to the throne of grace, as a most excellent antidote against unbelief:

4. Resolutely credit the promise of the gospel. Believe, that since he has called you to come unto him, he is willing to save you, and will save if you come unto him. If Satan and the unbelieving heart say, thou hast so sinned, and shalt thou be saved? Your answer is native and true. I have so sinned: but "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

5. Lay this down for a conclusion; that all the dispensations of providence work towards the accomplishment of the promise. Unbelief is a constant carper at the providence of God: it urges it as a bar set in the way of the promise. But do you silence these malignant whisperers of unbelief, by "holding the beginning of your confidence stedfast unto the end."