

THE
DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERS
OF
TRUE BELIEVERS.

VII. IN RELATION TO THEIR CARRIAGE IN A TIME OF ABOUNDING SIN,
AND THEIR SAFETY IN A SUFFERING TIME.*

THE CHARACTER OF ZION'S MOURNERS.

EZEKIEL ix. 4.

And the Lord said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh, and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof.

[The first sermon on this text.]

DAYS of abounding sin usher in days of overflowing judgments. They are merry jovial days to the wicked and ungodly, who swim with the stream, and having the reins on their necks, give themselves the loose in the course of apostasy and irreligion: but they are heavy days to the serious godly, who dare not go along with the stream, but must oppose it, though their opposition cannot mend it, and therefore must issue in sighing and crying for it. But when the day of reckoning with the generation of God's wrath comes, the guise will turn, they shall get sorrow, and the seriously-godly shall rejoice.

Ezekiel prophesied in Babylon, to which he had been carried captive among those that were carried away several years before the completing of the captivity in the reign of Zedekiah. It would seem he was among those that were led captive in the time of Jehoiachin, 2 Kings xxiv. Those that are most dear to God may smart with the first in time of common calamity. Those that were

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left, went on in their wickedness; and therefore Ezekiel is raised up in Babylon to prophesy of that utter overthrow which fell out in Zedekiah's reign, wherein the temple and holy city are sacked, and the land was laid desolate.

In the preceding chapter, the Lord shews Ezekiel in a vision the horrible abominations that people were yet going on in, chap. viii. 3. &c. and in this chapter he shews their terrible destruction by the Babylonians. This is represented by the destroying angels sent forth to kill; "They came from the way of the higher gate, which lieth toward the north, and every man a slaughter weapon in his hand," ver. 2. for their ruin was to be from Babylon.

In the text we have two things.

1. A party distinguishing themselves from others in a sinning time. And this they do by their exercise, not by any particular name of sect or party, but by their practice. Here we may observe,

(1.) The heavy exercise they have on their spirits at such a time. It is expressed by two words, both passive, importing that there is a load and a weight of grief and sorrow on them: which makes them sigh, when others laugh; oppresses their spirits, while others go lightly: and makes them cry. The word rather signifies to groan, as a deadly wounded man, who is hardly able to cry, Jer. li. 52. The sins of themselves and others pierce and wound their hearts, and they groan out their sorrows before the Lord, as under an evil which they are not able to remove. This word in the Hebrew, is in effect doubled, signifying, *that groan, that groan*; importing their fetching many a groan.

(2.) The ground of this their heavy exercise, *the abominations done in the midst thereof*. Jerusalem was the holy city, but the holy city was polluted with abominable wickedness of many sorts, whereby the name of God was dishonoured by a people called by his name. This made them sigh and groan. Not that they knew all the abominations done in it: but what they knew, all of it was heavy to them. and God constructed that to be mourning for what they knew not.

2. Here is God's distinguishing that party from others in a suffering time, seeing to their safety when the men with the slaughter-weapons were to go through. And here consider,

(1.) Who gives the orders concerning them, *The Lord said*. God takes notice of the mourning remnant among them; he books their prayers and complaints, he bottles their tears, and so has a particular eye upon them for their safety, when others are to be destroyed.

(2.) Who gets the orders about them, *He that was clothed with linen, having a writer's inkhorn by his side*. This is Jesus Christ, the Angel of the covenant, the Father's servant, the great High Priest,

to whom the people of God owe their temporal as well as their eternal salvation. He appears here in all his offices: he is among the destroying angels as a king; he is clothed in linen as a priest; he has a writer's inkhorn by his side as a prophet. Both he and they stand by the brazen altar, ver. 2. to shew that it was the profanation and slighting of the altar, a notable type of Christ, that was the great ground of the controversy with those who were to be destroyed: and that it was from thence, and not from their own sighs and cries that the safety of the mourning party was to come. The destroyers were six: the Saviour was but one; to shew that the far greater part of that people would fall, as being devoted to destruction.

(3.) The charge given concerning them. Whereof there are three parts.

[1.] *To go through the midst of Jerusalem*, the high streets. The mourners would be found there, by their carriage among others, testifying their dislike of the God-provoking abominations abounding among them. They were not ashamed to bear witness for God, and God will not be ashamed to own them.

[2.] *To set a mark upon them*. It is vain to inquire particularly into the nature of this mark; for all here was visionary. It is to be a direction to the destroyers whom to pass by and not to meddle with. And this is to be done before the destroying angels get the word to fall on, to shew the special care that God has of his own in the time of the greatest confusion. The Babylonians would not notice this mark, but over-ruling Providence would carry them by the persons so marked.

[3.] *To set it in their foreheads*. In the Egyptian destruction the mark was set on their door-posts, because their whole families were to be saved; but here it was to be set on their foreheads, because it was only designed for particular persons. Servants in the east had their master's name in their foreheads: and those who are sealed in their foreheads, God owns for his servants, while he treats the rest as enemies: compare Rev. vii. 3. The forehead is open to the view of all, which speaks the greater security of the marked ones, and that neither is God ashamed of them, nor ought they to be of him, even in the midst of dangers. The words afford the two following doctrines, viz.

DOCTRINE I. Times of abounding sin are heavy times, times of sighing and groaning to the serious godly, Zion's mourners.

DOCTRINE II. Those to whom sinning times are heavy times, making them sigh and groan, shall be marked for safety (by Jesus Christ) in suffering times.

I shall endeavour to explain and apply each of these doctrines in order.

DOCTRINE I. Times of abounding sin are heavy times, times of sighing and groaning to the serious godly, Zion's mourners.

In handling this doctrine, I shall,

I. Give the import of this exercise, and therein the character of Zion's mourners, to whom times of abounding sin are heavy times, times of sighing and groaning.

II. Show why such times are heavy times, times of sighing and groaning to them.

III. Conclude with some improvement.

I. I am to give the import of this exercise, and therein the character of Zion's mourners, to whom times of abounding sin are heavy times, times of sighing and groaning.

1. Zion's mourners are godly persons, who in respect of their state have come out from the world lying in wickedness, and joined themselves to Jesus Christ, 1 John v. 19. It is not to be expected, that while men lie still there, they will be mourners for the wickedness done among them. They that never truly repented for their own sin to this day, may indeed talk and inveigh against the sins of others, but cannot be kindly mourners with Christ's mark. In a time of abounding sin, they may bite and sting the sinners like serpents, as Satan reproving sin: but they can never mourn like doves over their abominations, Ezek. vii. 16.

2. Waking godly persons, not sleeping with the foolish virgins. Lot in Sodom was a mourner, and the ways of his neighbours were like thorns in his side, that kept him waking, 2 Pet. ii. 8. One may have the root of the matter in him, and yet being asleep he neither sees nor hears as he ought: and therefore cannot sigh and groan. And hence it comes to pass, that they may, with others, get a terrible wakening in the day of wrath; as sleeping Jonah did, when the storm arose.

3. Mourners for their own sins, Ezek. vii. 16. *mourning every one for his iniquity.* Mourning for sin begins at home, if of the right stamp. The man first mourns for and groans under the weight of the body of sin, Rom. vii. 24. and then under the weight of the sins of others; first over the sins of his own heart and life, and then over the sins of the land. This makes kindly mourning for the sins of the land: otherwise a man may be filled with anger and rage against them, as Jonah was against Nineveh, but not with Christian mourning.

4. Public-spirited persons, who are concerned to know how mat-

ters go in the generation wherein they live : how the interest of the gospel thrives, what regard is had to the law and honour of God, what case religion is in, whether Satan's kingdom is gaining or losing ground. For it is seeing and hearing that makes this sighing and groaning, as in the case of Lot, of whom it is said, 2 Pet. ii. 8. "That righteous man dwelling among the Sodomites, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day, with their unlawful deeds." Those who are concerned for nothing but their own particular affairs, and those whose concern is only as a matter of news, will neither of them be ranked among Zion's mourners but those who are concerned to hear or see, that they may be affected.

5. Tender persons, careful to keep their own garments clean in a defiling time, and dare not go along with the course of the times, Rev. iii. 4. They that row with the stream of a declining generation, follow the guise of the time, and will rather follow a multitude to do evil than be singular; they are none of Zion's mourners, nor Christ's marked ones. But either they bear the devil's mark; or if they belong to God, they will get a mark of God's anger against their way set upon them, as Lot got for his sojourning in Sodom.

6. Zealous persons, opposing themselves to the current of abominations, as they have access, Psal. lxxix. 9. They will be conscientious to do what they can in their stations to stem the tide, Psal. lxxv. 4. "Saying unto the fools, Deal not foolishly; and to the wicked, lift not up the horn." They will look on themselves as called to be God's witnesses, and to contend for him, Prov. xxviii. 4. They that find no concern they have with the piety or impiety of others, but are ready to say, "Am I my brother's keeper?" that find no obligation on them to support the cause of God and religion in the world, can be none of Zion's mourners. The mark they bear is neutrality, which ranks them on the side of God's enemies, Matth. xii. 30.

7. *Lastly*, Persons affected at the heart for the sins of the generation, to the making of them sigh and groan on that account before the Lord, when no eye sees but the all-seeing One, Jer. xiii. 17. And this implies four things.

(1.) The abominations done, lie cross to the grain and disposition of their souls : otherwise they would not make them sigh and groan. They have a real hatred of them, wherever they appear, Psal. cxxxix. 21. They would fain see the world reformed, and the nauseous wickedness prevailing in it curbed; and they would heartily desire to have religion and sobriety get place.

(2.) They are a burden to their spirits, as vile and filthy things are to the senses. They make them sigh as oppressed with the

weight of them ; Psal. lxxix. 9. As they are a burden to the Spirit of God, so they are a burden to the spirits of the godly. Hence many times the wings of a dove, Psal. lv. 6, 7. and a lodge in the wilderness, Jer. ix. 2. are desirable : and it turns the world into a wilderness to them, making them long to be away from it.

(3.) They are wounds to their hearts, they groan like wounded men, Jer. xv. 18. Men know that, in other things, the seeing of matters go quite cross to their inclinations, and the desire and bent of their hearts, will be very wounding to them. No wonder then that the wicked course of a sinful generation be wounding to a gracious heart.

(4.) *Lastly*, Their grief vents itself in sighs and groans, as native indications of the affection of their hearts, as saith the apostle, 2 Cor. v. 4. "For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened."

II. I proceed to shew why such times are heavy times, times of sighing and groaning to Zion's mourners.

1. Because of the dishonour they see done to God by these abominations, Psal. lxxix. 9. Whose heart would not rise to see his father that begat him affronted and treated with contempt without cause ? And how can the hearts of the serious godly chuse but be moved to see their fellow-worms contemn their heavenly Father, casting dishonour upon him, trampling under foot his sacred laws, slighting his Son, and grieving and vexing his Holy Spirit ? The relation betwixt God and the saints makes a sympathy, that what is done to the one is resented as done to the other.

2. Because of the wounds they see given to religion and the interest of Christ by these abominations, and the advantage they see accruing to the interest of the devil and his kingdom thereby, Rom. ii. 24. It is long since Michael and the dragon took the field one against another. The war is not yet ended, nor will be till the end of the world. Both armies are in the field, and the serious godly are concerned for the victory to fall to Christ's side ; and therefore they take notice how the battle proceeds. And as the devil and his followers rage, when religion gets ground ; no wonder the saints sigh and groan when it is otherwise. So that from the prevailing of abominations two arrows fly into a gracious heart.

(1.) An arrow of grief for the loss on Christ's side. Such abominations are done, and behold thereby the glory of the King of saints is darkened, the effect of his word of the gospel is marred, and a soul, perhaps several souls, are lost by it together, Eccl. ix. *ult.* "One sinner destroyeth much good."

(2.) An arrow of grief for the gain on the devil's side. So many abominations as are done in the midst of a land, so many trophies

are set up, as signs of Satan's victory over the kingdom of Christ. And that cannot but be moving to those whose hopes are all bound up in the kingdom of Christ, and the destruction of Satan's kingdom: though it is natural enough for those on Satan's side to rejoice.

3. Because of the fearful risk they see the sinners themselves run by these their abominations, Ps. cxix. 53. "Horror hath taken hold upon me, (says David) because of the wicked that forsake thy law." When Christ saw what a risk Jerusalem was running blindly, he wept over it saying, "If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes," Luke xix. 41, 42. Their eyes of the serious godly are open, and they see the hazard of a blinded generation, which they do not themselves. They see them running on the sword-point of vengeance, making haste to the pit, and will not be stayed; heaping up wrath against the day of wrath, and rushing to their eternal ruin. No wonder that knowing the terror of the Lord by their experience, and the preciousness of a soul, they sigh and groan to see souls so thrown away for a thing of nought.

4. Because of the contagion to others they see ready to spread from these abominations, Matth. xviii. 7. Eccl. ix. *ult.* Every one of them is an opening of the bottomless pit, by the steam of which many may be infected, and drop down into the same snare of the devil. O! the dismal consequences of the abominations done at first, may be by one sinner, as a little cloud like a man's hand, and may in time as it were darken the whole heavens. Men by one abomination may strike up a spring of abominations, that may run long after they are dead and rotten in their graves, as Jeroboam did. And the prospect of this occasions sighing and groaning to the serious godly.

5. Because of the judgments of God which they see may be brought upon those yet unborn, by reason of these abominations. Hence says the prophet, Hos. ix. 13, 14, "Ephraim, as I saw Tyrus, is planted in a pleasant place: but Ephraim shall bring forth his children to the murderer. Give them, O Lord: what wilt thou give? give them a miscarrying womb, and dry breasts. Many a man entails a curse on his family by his abominations; as appears by breaking the second commandment, by reason of which the Lord visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation, Exod. xx. 5. And the controversy may be pursued for his cause when he is in his grave. And if a stop be not put by repentance and reformation to the abominations and apostasies of this day, they will undoubtedly smart under them who are not yet born into the world, and the generation to come will have cause to pronounce a wo on this going before them, Matth. xxiii. 35, 36.

6. Because of the Lord's displeasure with the generation for these abominations, Jer. xv. 1. It is the joy of the serious godly, to see the tokens of God's good pleasure with the generation wherein their lot is cast, that the Lord will honour them, and take pleasure to dwell among them. But abounding abominations turn matters quite another way. If temporal strokes are kept off, they are left to pine away under spiritual plagues; God is provoked to depart, to withdraw his presence from his ordinances, and they are left to lament after the Lord. The glory departs by degrees, and who knows where it may end, if it may not go the length of removing the candlestick, as the Lord threatened he would do to the church of Ephesus, Rev. ii. 5.

7. *Lastly*, Because of the common calamity in which they see these abounding abominations may involve themselves and the whole land. The serious godly are sensible that with them also are sins against the Lord, and that God may justly proceed against them because of their iniquities. When then they see the cup of a land's iniquity fast filling by many hands, they have reason to be afraid of seeing it filled to the brim, and that it may run over even in their time. And however others may make a jest of the threatening of land-overflowing judgments, they dare not do it, Hab. iii. 16. And therefore the awful prospect of the day of the Lord's anger against the generation of his wrath, makes them sigh and groan.

I shall conclude at present with a short word of improvement.

O sirs! shew yourselves serious godly, by mourning over and sighing and groaning for the abominations done in the midst of the land. Turn from the God-provoking courses of this day, and go not in the way of the multitude, as ye would not perish with them; but labour to keep your garments undefiled, by standing at a distance from the abominations of the time; set yourselves in opposition to them, and mourn over the dishonours ye see and hear done to the holy name of God, as ever ye would have the mark of safety set on your foreheads.

The case of the generation affords much matter of mourning, if ye consider,

1. From whence we are fallen. The time was when the land was solemnly married to the Lord by covenant for reformation, and the Lord put a particular honour on Scotland by his presence in ordinances. But now reformation is out of sight, and matters are still going from evil to worse; so that if the Lord's hand do not interpose, it is hard to say where we will stop.

2. The unsuccessfulness of the gospel. There is little conviction,

and less conversion, by the preaching of the word. Most part of the generation are proof against warnings from providences and ordinances. Whatever light there may be, there is little heat.

3. The abounding of gross scandalous immoralities in the light of the gospel, the sacred name of God rent by horrid imprecations and blasphemies, his sabbaths profaned, murder, adultery, theft, perjury, and covetousness prevailing; while errors subversive of the foundation of Christianity, such as Arian, Socinian, and Arminian tenets, are vented, the purity of the doctrine of the gospel darkened, and put into an ill name, as if it were downright Antinomianism.”*

4. Universality of the apostasy, a growing untenderness among all sorts, whereby causes of sorrow are multiplied among ministers and professors, among the young and aged; many pulling off their mask of religion, and throwing it by; and from the company of professors, communicants going over to the camp of the profane.

5. The incorrigibleness in it. A brow of brass, refusing to be ashamed, is added to all the defection that has taken place. People will not be reprov'd and convinc'd, but wilfully with a high hand go on in their sin. So that sighing and groaning is almost all that is left to do, for contending and striving are to little purpose.

6. *Lastly*, From all which there is plain evidence of fearful judgments abiding the generation, so much the more terrible as, after many deliverances do but make way to new steps farther forward in it. And national fasting and humiliation are grown out of use, but so far as they are called for by those who neither know nor can be supposed to know the state of this church and land with respect to these things. †

* It was at this time that Arianism and Socinianism were rampant in England, that Professor Simson at Glasgow broached Arianism under modern refinements, and that the preaching of pure apostolical doctrine was by some in the church branded with the name of Antinomianism.

† This relates to the church's not appointing fasts without the state, whose province it is to specify the causes of a religious fast. A neglect which there is still too much ground to complain of.