

We conclude with the following advices. Labour to get a just esteem of your souls, and a due sense of what concerns another life. The soul is the man, as being the best part of the man, the loss of which nothing can ever counterbalance. Matth. xvi. 26, "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" The other life is the life chiefly to be cared for, since that only is the life which will have no end; and a man is happy or unhappy, as his plan for that life is well or ill laid. Be sensible of the real drudgery of sin. It is as real a servitude as ever was in the world, while men serve divers lusts. This is clear from the very light of nature: the consideration of the noble nature of the soul, with the experience of the tyranny of unruly passions, made some heathen moralists to lay it down as a principle, That a wise man is a free man. Wherefore, believe that a holy life is the only true liberty; Psalm cxix. 44, 45, "So shall I keep thy law continually, for ever and ever. And I will walk at liberty; for I seek thy precepts." He, then, who has the mastery over his own corrupt will and inclinations, who walks in the way of God's commandments, is a person the most free and easy. *Lastly*, Come to Christ for his redeeming blood and free spirit. Renounce the devil, the world, and the flesh. Receive and improve Jesus, as made of God unto you, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. Amen.

JESUS OPENS THE PRISON DOORS TO THE PRISONERS.

SERMON LIV.

ISAIAH lxi. 1,

And the opening of the prison to them that are bound.

HERE is another benefit which, in the gospel, is brought by Christ to sinners who are in their natural state, namely, a proclamation as to opening the prison to the prisoners. In this there are two things.

1. The misery of a natural state, which is here laid out in its full extent, in three particulars. You have heard that unconverted sinners are Satan's captives; this is a sad case, but it is yet worse; for,

(1.) They are also prisoners. Every captive is not a prisoner, but all natural men, being Satan's captives, are held prisoners, shut up in the prison of their natural state. This is Satan's prison, crammed full of his prisoners of war. But this is not all; for,

(2.) They are prisoners in chains, they are bound in the prison. Satan has his irons on them, as malefactors under sentence of death, that they may not escape. This is still worse than being a prisoner. But worse than all this is here stated; for,

(3.) They are blinded too in their prison. For the word rendered opening, does particularly relate to the opening of the eyes; and therefore the prophet uses it to express the relieving of such prisoners perfectly. This is evident by comparing Luke iv. 18, "And recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them who are bruised." It was a custom much used in the eastern nations, and retained among the Turks to this day, to put out the eyes of some of their prisoners, adding this misery to their imprisonment. So the Philistines did with Samson; Judges xvi. 21; and Nebuchadnezzar with Zedekiah; 2 Kings xxv. 7. This, in a spiritual sense, is the case of all prisoners in their natural state. To sum up all, O unconverted sinner! thou art Satan's captive, a captive in prison, and a prisoner in chains; and withal thine eyes are put out, thou art in darkness, even darkness itself. In the words there is,

2. A suitable remedy, full help proclaimed by Christ in the gospel. God has seen the misery of the prisoners, his Son has paid the ransom for them, and thereupon he is sent to proclaim the opening of the prison doors to them, opening every way to them; for this expression comprehends the affording full remedy to their case; namely, opening their prison,—opening their chains,—and opening their eyes. By his word he offers it, by his Spirit he effects it, in all his elect.—From this subject we propose to your consideration the following DOCTRINES:—

DOCTRINE I. That every unconverted sinner is a bound man in the prison of a natural state, with his eyes put out.

DOCTRINE II. That by open proclamation in the gospel, Christ offers to the prisoners in a natural state, an opening of their eyes, of their bands, and of their prison-doors.

We begin with

DOCTRINE I. That every unconverted sinner is a bound man in the prison of a natural state, with his eyes put out.

For illustrating this doctrine, we shall,

I. Speak of the imprisonment in which guilty sinners are.

II. Mention the bands, chains, and fetters wherewith they are bound in the prison of a natural state.

III. Point out the darkness and blindness of the prisoners in their natural state.

I. We are to consider the imprisonment in which unconverted sinners are.

This prison is the natural unconverted state; and thus that word, 1 Pet. iii. 19, "By which also he went and preached to the spirits in prison," is by some understood. However, it is plain that this is meant in our text. Thus Peter said to Simon the sorcerer; Acts viii. 23, "For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity." Thus sinners in their natural state are said to be all concluded under sin, and shut up under the law; Gal. iii. 22, 23. Concluded or shut up, that is, declared to be so. Let us consider, then, the natural state as a state of imprisonment. Here we shall answer the three following QUESTIONS:—

1. Whose prisoners are they?
2. What are the causes of this imprisonment? And,
3. In what condition are natural men, as prisoners in this their natural state? We begin with,

QUEST. 1. Whose prisoners are they?

(1.) Unconverted sinners are God's prisoners, as the great Judge and party whom they have offended; Rom. xi. 32, "God hath concluded them all in unbelief." There are two things in a natural state.—The sinfulness of it; they can do nothing but sin. Move they cannot without that circle, more than a prisoner out of his prison.—The misery of it. They are under the curse; Gal. iii. 10. This last, God, as a just Judge, inflicted on mankind for the breach of the covenant of works; and while this lies upon them, there can be no communion betwixt God and them, and consequently nothing but sin in them; and so they are all concluded under sin.

(2.) They are Satan's prisoners. He acts as the jailor, and is therefore said to have the power of death, Heb. ii. 14. Man, having freely yielded to Satan, and become his captive, was delivered up into his hand by the Judge. They are under the power of Satan, Acts xxvi. 18. He keeps the keys of this prison, and watchfully marks his prisoners, that none of them escape. Nay, when the commandment is come, to deliver the elect out of his hand, he will not yield them up, till the prison-doors be broke open, and they are forcibly taken out of his hand.

QUEST. 2. What are the causes of this imprisonment? As to this we observe, that they are in prison,

(1.) As debtors to divine justice. Sin is a debt, and the worst of all debts; committing sin is contracting a debt, which sinners are unable to pay, but it must be paid; a satisfaction must be made to justice to the utmost farthing. As to natural men, their debt is not forgiven. All their accounts stand uncanceled. They have as yet no share in the Cautioner's payment. Therefore they are kept in this prison justly for their debt, and they cannot escape. They

were laid up there for our father Adam's debt. This debt brought all mankind into the prison, Rom. v. 12, "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned." The covenant being broken, we became liable to pay the penalty, and, being unable to relieve ourselves, were shut up in prison under the wrath and curse of God. They are also arrested there for their own debt, contracted in their own persons. Every sinful thought, word, or action, is a new item in our accounts. And at the instance of every broken commandment, the law arrests the natural man in the prison, clapping its curse upon the sinner; so that the longer one remains in his natural state, there is always the less hope of his delivery. Nay, his delivery is impossible, till the Cautioner loose all the arrests by paying the whole debt.

(2.) They are in prison as malefactors condemned in law; John iii. 18, "He that believeth not is condemned already." There is a sentence of death passed upon all men in a natural state, they are condemned to die eternally; and therefore are committed to the jailor, to keep them in the prison to the day of execution, which they know not how soon it may be appointed, how soon death may lead out the prisoner to have the sentence fully executed upon him. I go on to,

QUEST. 3. In what condition are natural men as prisoners in this their natural state? Their condition is most dismal; for,

(1.) They are under the wrath of God, as the malefactor put in prison is under the wrath of his judge. Hence it is said, Eph. ii. 3, "And were by nature the children of wrath, even as others." A natural state is a state of wrath. God bears a legal enmity against thee as long as thou art out of Christ. There is a black cloud of wrath which always hovers over the head of the natural man, and never will scatter till he be a new creature. God is ever angry, never pleased with him; Psalm vii. 11, "God is angry with the wicked every day." His person is not acceptable to God; Psalm v. 5, "The foolish shall not stand in his sight, and he hateth all the workers of iniquity." Nor are his performances acceptable to God, Isa. lxvi. 3. God will have no communion nor fellowship with him; Amos iii. 3, "Can two walk together except they be agreed?" There is wrath in his word, his looks, and dispensations towards him.

(2.) They are both under the dominion of the law, and also under the lash of it; Gal. iii. 10, "For as many as are of the works of the law, are under the curse, for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things written in the book of the law to do them." It has him as fast in its hands as ever a prisoner was. It

has him by the neck, saying, Pay what thou owest; and will never quit the hold through the ages of eternity, unless he get the Surety that is able to take it off his hand. Its demands are high, quite above his reach; perfect satisfaction for what is past; perfect obedience for what is to come. It is a merciless creditor, and will abate thee nothing. As long as thou art in its power, (and that is as long as thou art in this prison), thou must lay thy account with the payment of the utmost farthing. What though the sentence is not speedily executed? a reprieve is no pardon; Deut. xxxii. 35.

(3.) They are under the power of Satan, as the keeper of the prison, Acts xxvi. 18. He has a commanding and a restraining power over them, 2 Tim. ii. 26, "They are in the snare of the devil, and taken captive by him at his will." They cannot move out without the bounds of his jurisdiction, more than the prisoner out of the dungeon. It is true, Satan keeps not all alike close, some have the liberty of the form of godliness, on account of which they reckon themselves secure as to the goodness of their state, and by this delusion they are held the faster in his hands.

(4.) They are in a most uncomfortable condition. If a person was in a palace as a prison, it would be uncomfortable; far more in this case, the pit wherein is no water has nothing to refresh the soul; Zech. ix. 11. It is true, most natural men are stupid, they consider it not; they are blind, and they see not the shadow of death about them. But when once their eyes are opened, there is no more rest for them there; they cry, "What shall we do to be saved?" They see the filthy prison-garments of unmortified, unpardoned sins about them, which they can no longer wear at ease. The scanty allowance of the prisoner's diet, unblest mercies, which can serve for nothing but to keep in the wretched life till the day of execution.

(5.) They have no security for a moment's safety; but if their eyes were opened, they would see themselves every moment in hazard of dropping into the pit of hell; see the natural man's case, Psalm vii. 11—16. He is ever standing before God's bent bow, and has nothing to secure him for a moment from the drawing of it. He is condemned already, and the sentence is past; no day known for the execution, uncertain but every day the dead-warrant may be given out against him, and he led forth to execution. What can he see to put it off, but long abused patience which will wear out at length?

(6.) They are so secured, that they can never get away without satisfaction for their debts and crimes. There is no breaking this prison. Sooner may bars of iron and gates of brass be got over,

than a prisoner can get out of the state of wrath without satisfying the demands of the law. And therefore the sinner will die in this prison, if he come not to Christ. There is no getting out of this pit but by the blood of the covenant.

For the improvement of this part of the subject, O! sirs, be concerned to look to the state of sin in this glass, and be ye duly affected with it, as the matter requires. Consider, sinner, where you are, and in what condition. Is the state of sin a prison-state? Then who are the men that walk at liberty? Is it not these whose consciences are purged by faith in Christ, whose guilt is removed, who walk after the Spirit, and lead a holy, heavenly, circumspect life? Or is it those who, scorning to be bound up to the rules of a holy walk, can stretch their consciences at their pleasure, and take to themselves a sinful liberty, which others dare not for their souls, who can laugh at those things for which others mourn, and follow their lusts to the ruin of their souls? Truly no. All that sinful liberty which those do take, and all the pleasures which they have in it, is but the rattling of the chains of the devil's prisoners, while they go up and down in their prison. Is the state of sin a state in which ye can quietly sleep another night? It is a Sodom on which fire and brimstone will come down. Haste ye, and escape for your life. Ah! sinner, canst thou be at ease in a state of wrath? The world, it may be, smiles upon thee; it may be that it frowns; but what of either of these, while God is angry with thee every day? Thou hast perhaps something for many years for thy body, it may be nothing; but what security hast thou for thy soul, when death shall call thee hence, thou knowest not how soon? Is the work of conversion to God a slight business, about which persons are under small necessity to trouble their heads? Surely it is a most weighty business, which, if it be not done, there is nothing at all done for eternity. Let men in an unconverted state put on what appearances of religion they will, perform what duties they will, they are but dead works, wrought in Satan's prison, and leave the worker in a state of death. Turn, turn ye, then, from your sins unto God, cry for regenerating sanctifying grace, rest not till you get it. Will you not eagerly embrace the offer made you in the proclamation of opening the prison to those that are bound? Christ is come to your prison door, offering by his blood and Spirit to set you free. Are you willing to come away? or are you so in love with your prison as not to care for deliverance? We are,

II. To mention the bands, chains, and fetters, with which unconverted sinners are bound in the prison of a natural state. These are twofold, God's and Satan's. There are,

1. God's bands, for they are his prisoners ; and these are heavier than the heaviest irons ever were on prisoners ; for,

(1.) There are bands of guilt and the curse on them all, by which the law binds them over to wrath, Gal. iii. 10. Guilt is a bond binding over the sinner to deserved punishment. The curse of the law devotes him to destruction. These, worse than iron fetters, enter into the soul ; and while they lie on persons, they cannot stir out of the prison, nor make their escape. No sooner is the soul awakened to feel them, than it feels them heavier than can be borne.

(2.) There are the bands of judicial hardness on some. Those with whom the Lord has been long dealing, who will not hear, but harden themselves against calls, warnings, and reproofs ; many times the Lord judicially hardens them, makes hardness of heart their punishment, as it is their sin ; recalls the motions of his Spirit, Hos. iv. 17, " Ephraim is joined to his idols, let him alone." He gives them over, saying, " He that is unjust, let him be unjust still ; and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still," Rev. xxii. 11 ; he gives them up to their own lusts, Psalm lxxxi. 12, " So I gave them up unto their own hearts' lust ; and they walked in their own counsels ;" and he gives them up to Satan to harden them, 2 Cor. iv. 4, " He hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them." So that under the most softening means they grow worse and worse, harder and harder, Isa. vi. 9, 10. These are fearful bands : but besides these there are,

2. The devil's bands, which he puts on his prisoners in their natural state, to secure them, that they may not come out of it to Christ, may not be converted, may not be turned from their sins unto God. These are many ; such as,

(1.) The band of prejudices. These are so fixed on natural men, that Jesus says, Matth. xi. 6, " Blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in me." Satan dresses up religion and true holiness in such a monstrous shape, that they are affrighted at it, they cannot wish it, they can never get a heart to it ; and therefore they entertain Christ's message, as Nabal did David's, 1 Sam. xxv. 11, Shall we, say they, give up with that pleasant or profitable way, in which we are, and betake ourselves to a way that must needs be a continual weariness ? This is a strong band, but when the eyes are opened, and God's ways are tried in earnest, it would break like an untwined thread ; Prov. iii. 17, " Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace." Come and see. There is,

(2.) The band of ill company. Satan does as the Romans did

with some of their prisoners, he binds his prisoners together, so that one helps to hold fast another, to their ruin; Prov. xiii. 20, "A companion of fools shall be destroyed." Thus there are bundles of drunkards, swearers, Sabbath profaners, despisers of what is good, worldlings, to whom the world is the chief good; and every one of the bundle is a snare to the soul of another. With an eye to this is the terrible sentence given, Matth. xiii. 30, "Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them." Therefore is the gospel-invitation, Prov. ix. 5, 6, "Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled. Forsake the foolish, and live, and go in the way of understanding." There is,

(3.) The band of earthly-mindedness. This held them fast who were bidden to the gospel-supper, Luke xiv. 16—20. The wretched world had its bands on every one of them, so that they could not stir to come. They must look to this and the other business, that they do not lose their advantage; and while the devil's servant is thus busy here and there, looking well to this and that, the immortal soul, with the keeping of which God charges him, is lost. The pleasures of the world, like syren songs, arrest them like iron fetters covered with silk; these secure them. The cares of the world, like a thicket, entangle them, they cannot get leisure for them to mind their souls; and the weary earth ever interposing betwixt them and the Sun of Righteousness, they are thus kept in a dark prison. There is,

4. The band of unbelief. This is such an one as no less than the arm of the Lord can take off; Isa. liii. 1, "Who hath believed our report? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed?" Men hear the word, but they do not believe it; they believe not the doctrine of the gospel, they count it foolishness, 1 Cor. i. 23. The promises they do not believe, they count them but fair words, and will not quit their certainty in a sinful course for the hope of them, Heb. iv. 1, 2, 11. The threatenings they consider as mere scarecrows, and in spite of them promise themselves peace; Deut. xxix. 19, "And it shall come to pass, when he heareth the words of this curse, that he bless himself in his heart, saying, I shall have peace, though I walk in the imagination of mine heart, to add drunkenness to thirst." They believe not their need of Christ, and therefore they slight and reject him. There is,

5. The band of slothfulness. This ties down the natural man in his prison-bed, saying, Prov. vi. 10, "Yet a little sleep, yet a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep." It hangs so heavy upon his legs, that he cannot move them in the way of God; Prov. xxvi. 13, "The slothful man saith, There is a lion in the way." "A

lion is in the streets, yet his feet are swift to evil," Isa. lix. 7. This band is so heavy on his head, that he cannot lift up his eyes; and on his hands, that he cannot lift them to his mouth for his soul's behoof; Prov. xxvi. 15, "The slothful hideth his hand in his bosom; it grieveth him to bring it again to his mouth." This is a hellish gulph on earth, that swallows up convictions, resolutions, motions of good, and the like. They could be content to be better, if God would work with them as with stocks and stones, which are at no pains for their own polishing. They can spend whole days, and even nights, for the world and for their lusts; but to spend a day, or a considerable part of a day, in clearing their accounts, and laying down their measures for eternity, this is what they cannot be troubled with. There is,

6. The band of delays. This held Felix fast, when the rest of the bands on him were like to give way, Acts xxiv. 25. When trembling under Paul's preaching, he said, "Go thy way for this time; when I have a more convenient season, I will call for thee." The prisoners, many of them, are not resolved not to come out, only they put it off, resolving to do it afterwards. The young put it off till they be old, the old till death come to their bed-side. Some make one resolution, and some another, to turn to the Lord; and though the time comes which they had set, yet they still put it off again to another time; and so on, till death comes at length, and sweeps them off, ere they have power to execute their good purposes. There is,

7. The band of delusion; Isa. xlv. 20, "He feedeth on ashes; a deceived heart hath turned him aside, that he cannot deliver his soul, nor say, Is there not a lie in my right hand?" They are under a fearful delusion as to their state, like Laodicea, Rev. iii. 17, "Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased in goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." As one is refused admission by mistake, so Christ is often kept at the door; for the poor deluded sinner thinks he is in already. They abide fast in the gall of bitterness, because they imagine themselves to be got out of it already. They remain unconverted, because they reckon themselves already converted. This is a most dangerous case, which should stir us all up to an impartial examination of our state; Isa. i. 11, "Behold, all ye that kindle a fire, that compass yourselves about with sparks: walk in the light of your fire, and in the sparks which you have kindled. This ye shall have of mine hand, ye shall lie down in sorrow." There is,

Lastly, The band of divers lusts; 2 Tim. iii. 6, "Laden with sins,

led away with divers lusts." They are laden with them, as ever a prisoner was with irons, so that by them Satan holds them fast. Unmortified lusts crawl up and down, preying on their souls, and keeping them in a state of death. They hang about them, crying, Give, give, so that they can get nothing done to purpose for eternity. And so many unmortified lusts as there are about a man, Satan has so many handles to hold him by. A lust of covetousness, of pride, sensuality, and the like, will hold a man fast.

This part of the subject may be improved in a use of lamentation.

This is a lamentation, and may be for a lamentation over all the unconverted, as bound men in the prison of a natural state. Thou art little concerned with it, but the misery of the case deserves tears of blood. For thou art laid up in custody at the instance of God's law and justice, as a debtor and criminal. As a debtor, thou shalt not be let out till thou hast paid the utmost farthing. But, alas! thou hast nothing wherewith to pay; men and angels cannot help thee; their united stock is not sufficient to pay off the debt of sin. As a criminal, thou canst not be let out, till thou abide thy trial; and terrible will it be whenever God calls thee to it; when thy indictment is read, and thou art tried for thy life according to law, what canst thou say? thy crimes are undeniable. Thou canst not get out by force or fraud, slight or might. Thou art God's prisoner, as the offended party. What canst thou do or say that is not known to him who sees all things? Whither canst thou flee, where his hand will not find thee out. Thou art Satan's prisoner as thy jailor. He has malice enough to prompt him to watch and keep thee, power enough to hold thee still. His iron-bands and chains are upon thee in the prison-house, how canst thou escape? Look to the bands on thee in the prison; look on them and mourn, and lament thy case. There are bands on thee of God's laying on, and who but he then can take them off? for he shutteth, and no man can open, Rev. iii. 7. Thou art bound under the curse of the law, and God has bound thee; to whom canst thou apply to loose thee? If men lay on bands, God can loose the prisoner, whether they will or not; "The Lord looseth the prisoners," Psalm cxlvi. 7. But if God lay on the bands, the whole creation may stand and commiserate the prisoner. They may drop a tear, but neither angels nor men can loose him. There are bands on thee of Satan's laying on; and these must be sad ones which are led on by that hand. He is the strong man; it must be a stronger than he who can loose them; this is beyond thy reach. Thou didst not feel God's bands, but walkest lightly under them. Thou entertainest and takest a pleasure in Satan's chains, in your company, sinful pleasures, and the like. This makes

thy escape the more hopeless; while thou rejoicest in thine iron fetters, as if they were chains of gold, it is an evidence that thou art beside thyself. Finally, These bands will infallibly secure thy ruin, if thou be not loosed in time; thou wilt die in the prison, if thou be not timeously brought out. There is but one step betwixt thee and death, eternal death. If thou die in the prison of an unconverted state, thou wilt go to the prison of hell, where the prisoners are kept without hope of any release.

This being the case, see to yourselves in time, O prisoners of hope! Labour to be loosed from your bands, that you die not in the pit. To such I would offer the following ADVICES:—

1. Awake, and feel the weight of the bands on thee; there is no hope of thy deliverance while thou walkest lightly under them. Mourn over your guilt, your unbelief, and long for deliverance.

2. Put your case in the hand of the great Cautioner, who is willing and able to relieve you. Employ the Advocate, who will certainly carry the plea in your favour. He will not do as the butler who forgot Joseph, though employed to use his interest to bring him out of prison; but by the blood of his covenant Jesus will deliver you.

3. Give in your petition to your Judge: Job ix. 15, "I would," says Job, "make my supplication to my Judge." Pray, pray, ye prayerless persons; pray every day, pray always, ye who pray only now and then; a sign that ye have to begin this exercise, to pray to purpose. Pray seriously, fervently, importunately, ye that are formal in prayer. Your life lies at stake: there is no time to trifle.

4. Hasten your trial, that your plea may be heard before a throne of grace; for if you miss that tribunal, it will come before another at death and judgment, when it will be impossible for you to stand. There are two tribunals for such prisoners, the tribunal of mercy and grace, and the tribunal of justice. There is, the tribunal of mercy and grace, to which the sinner is brought in the work of conversion, in time, in this world. Hither the elect prisoner is brought, and stands trembling, while other prisoners lie still in the prison, jovial and easy. Here he is accused, convicted and condemned; he subscribes to the equity of the sentence; but, by the provision made in this court for criminals, he comes off acquitted from the sentence of death, to return to the prison no more. There is the tribunal of justice, to which the sinner is brought at death and the last day. Here the prisoner, in his natural state, is sisted, accused, convicted, and condemned without remedy; Matth. xxii. 13, "Then said the king to the servants, Bind him (that wants the wedding-garment) hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer dark-

ness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." And from hence he is sent into the prison of hell. At the one or the other of these tribunals, all the prisoners must appear for their trial. To the first, I would have you to hasten your cause; for it has advantages which the other has not. In the first, the law is subservient to the gospel, and condemns, to make the sinner flee to the Mediator; Gal. iii. 24, "Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith." In the second, the law condemns, to make the sinner's case absolutely hopeless. The one makes the sinner sick unto life and everlasting health, the other to death. At the one, a person may have the advantage of a Surety to undertake for his debt, of an Advocate to plead for him, 1 John ii. 1, "If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the propitiation for our sins." He never fails to bring his client's cause to a comfortable issue. But at the other, there is no Cautioner, no Advocate; the prisoner must act all for himself; yea, the Cautioner and Advocate is judge to condemn him. Finally, at the one, there is a covert of blood for the condemned man to flee under, where the sentence of death cannot take effect. There are horns of an altar, from which justice cannot take him, and a city of refuge, where he shall be safe. But none of these are to be had at the other: therefore haste the trial. We now proceed,

III. To consider the darkness and blindness of the prisoners in a natural state. Here it will be necessary to attend to three things. *First*, The nature of this blindness. *Secondly*, The kinds of it incident to these prisoners. And, *Thirdly*, The effects of it upon them. Let us attend,

First, To the nature of this blindness. And here we may observe, that it is a spiritual, and not a bodily defect. Though they have their eyes in their heads, their poor souls are full of darkness; Eph. v. 8, "Ye were sometimes darkness." Though they may have a natural and literal knowledge of spiritual things, yet they want the spiritual and saving light of life; 1 Cor. ii. 14, "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." How manifestly are these distinguished! Though they have the knowledge of the history of these things, yet they are strangers to the mystery of them. Thus it is said, Deut. xxix. 4, "Yet the Lord hath not given you an heart to perceive, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, unto this day." Again, it is total blindness. They are not only dark, but darkness itself, Eph. v. 8. There is not the least gleam of saving light in their souls; they are absolute strangers to, and unacquainted with God in Christ. Their

service in religion is to an unknown God. They know not Christ; there is a transcendent glory in him, but they cannot perceive it. They are strangers to themselves; they are wretched and miserable, but know it not, Rev. iii. 17. They see not their sins in their own ugly colours, in their natural deformity. Let us,

Secondly, Attend to the kinds of blindness incident to these prisoners. There is a natural blindness common to all of them. All Adam's children are born blind; Rom. iii. 11, "There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God." Our minds naturally are void of saving light, we have lost saving knowledge, with other parts of God's image. Hence, whenever grace opens the eyes, people are as it were brought into a new world, seeing things they never saw before, and seeing them in that manner in which they never saw them before. Again, There is an acquired blindness, which they procure to themselves; Eph. iv. 18, "Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart." The power and prevalence of lusts blind them more and more to the true interest of their souls. The light shines about them, but they hate it; it glances in their faces from the word and providence, but they shut their eyes and will not let it in; Isa. xxvi. 11, "Lord, when thy hand is lifted up, they will not see." They by this means strengthen their diseases; and the longer they continue in it, there is the less hope. Finally, There is a judicial blindness; Isa. vi. 9, 10, "And he said, Go and tell this people, hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes." They rebel against the light, they abuse that light which they have, they will not open their eyes to clear light, and God judicially shuts them. He withdraws the common influence of his Spirit from them, and they are infatuated, so that they cannot see their own true interest, but act as fools and madmen in matters of the greatest importance. They are "delivered over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient," Rom. i. 28. They are also delivered to Satan, who, as the executioner of justice, binds them more and more; 2 Cor. iv. 4, "He blinds the minds of them that believe not." We are to attend,

Thirdly, To the effects of this blindness on the prisoners. These are many; I mention the following:—There is,

1. A situation truly uncomfortable and piteous. They are sitting in darkness, and in the region and shadow of death, Matth. iv. 16. What a melancholy case were the Egyptians in during the

three days' darkness, while the Israelites had light in all their dwellings ! It was among the last and worst of their plagues. Surely light is sweet ; and the more excellent the light is, it must be the sadder to be deprived of it. The light of God's grace and favour is the most excellent light, and therefore heaven is called light, and hell is darkness, utter darkness ; no gleam of comfort in hell. A natural state is the suburbs of hell, and no real comfort in this condition, but a possibility of help. Therefore the saints pity them, as in a most piteous condition. Jerusalem's case drew tears from our Saviour's eyes, Luke xix. 41, 42. There is,

2. Unacquaintedness with their own state of sinfulness and misery ; Rev. vii. 17. Their misery ; they are blind, they see not the hazard they are in every moment of dropping into the pit. The messengers of death are approaching them, the sword of justice is hanging over their heads, signs of approaching ruin are on them and about them ; others see it, but not themselves ; Hos. vii. 9, " Strangers have devoured his strength, and he knoweth it not ; yea, gray hairs are here and there upon him, yet he knoweth it not." The prodigal never saw his starving condition, till he came to himself, Luke xv. 17. Their sinfulness also ; of this they are ignorant ; Rom. vii. 9, " For I was alive without the law once ; but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died." As in a house, the moths flying thick there are not perceived till the sun-beams enlighten it ; so, till the Lord open the eyes of the blinded sinner, he sees not those swarms of living lusts which are preying on his dead soul, the innumerable evils which compass him about, those multiplied pieces of guilt which are binding him over to destruction.

3. They are easily ensnared and deceived in matters of the greatest concern. Our Lord Jesus pronounces a woe to the world because of offences, Matth. xviii. 7. Because stumbling-blocks laid before the blind cannot but have most pernicious effects. The world is full of snares laid by Satan and his instruments ; and the blindness of the mind exposes men to the utmost hazard by them. How easily are they cheated out of their greatest interests for another world, and made to hug a shadow instead of the substance, and embrace a scorpion instead of a fish, and stones instead of bread ; because, though they be eagle-eyed in the things of time, they are like bats and owls as to the light of life. Like Esau, for one morsel of meat they sell this birth-right, Heb. xii. 16.

4. They get no good of the light of the gospel, but stumble at noon-day, as in the dark. They receive this grace in vain. The night and day are alike to the blind, winter and spring to the dead tree. And hence men live under the gospel as loosely, profanely,

and carelessly, as if they were living in the dark corners of the earth. The light of the gospel, like a shining sun, has arisen, teaching us, that, "denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world," Tit. ii. 12. But instead of going like men to their proper work, they like wild beasts go to their dens, and lie at ease, neither working out their own salvation, nor doing any good to others. The light is set up to them, but their works are works of darkness, and so they hate the light.

5. They are precipitating themselves into the utmost hazard to their souls, without fear; Psalm xxxvi. 1, "The transgression of the wicked saith within my heart, that there is no fear of God before his eyes." How fearlessly do men venture themselves into the forbidden ground, rush in the way of sin on the sword-point of justice; Jer. viii. 6, "I hearkened, and heard, but they spake not aright; no man repented him of his wickedness, saying, What have I done? every one turned to his course, as the horse rusheth into the battle." They drink up iniquity as the ox the water, being in that case as blind men drinking up a cup of poison, which they know not to be such. There is,

6. Deep security in the most dangerous condition, as not seeing what is before them. They go on in their courses, as the sinners did before the flood, Matth. xxiv. 38. They are exposed every day to the utmost hazard, yet they are secure. They stand before God's bent bow, as a mark to his arrows, yet they are at ease. Wrath is pursuing them, yet they are not concerned to flee from the wrath to come. They are jovial while about the pit's mouth, and even though they are in hazard every moment of falling into it.

Lastly, To sum up all in a word, this blindness fills the whole man in heart and life with darkness and confusion; Matth. vi. 23, "But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness; if, therefore, the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!" A person can do nothing which is good in this case, he lies open to all evil both of sin and misery. And this darkness, unremoved, will make way for eternal darkness.

Having, as we proceeded, made some practical improvement, in conclusion, we shall only exhort you,

1. To be convinced, of this your natural darkness; believe it from the Lord's word, and believe your hazard from it, though otherwise ye do not see it.

2. See your need of Christ to open your eyes. Pray for the Spirit; say, with the blind man, "Lord, that mine eyes may be opened."

Lastly, From what has been said on the several parts of Christ's commission with respect to natural men, unconverted sinners may get a broad view of their misery. Ye are Satan's captives, yea, prisoners, God's prisoners, the devil's prisoners, prisoners in bands, and blinded prisoners. Be deeply affected with your condition, and be persuaded, as prisoners of hope, to return to your strong-holds, while you have access to them. While it is called to-day, harden not your hearts, but hearken to his voice, proclaiming that he is "anointed to open the prison to them that are bound."

THE SAME SUBJECT CONTINUED.

S E R M O N L V.

ISAIAH lxi. 1,

And the opening of the prison to them that are bound.

HAVING attended to the first doctrinal point on this subject, we now go on to

DOCTRINE II. That, by open proclamation in the gospel, Jesus offers to prisoners in a natural state, an opening of their eyes, a loosing of their bands, and a bringing them out of their prisons.

We shall illustrate the different parts of this doctrine, under the following heads :—

I. We shall show, that Christ offers to such an opening of their eyes, the recovery of their spiritual sight, and to bring them from darkness unto light.

II. We shall show how Christ takes off the devil's bands from these prisoners.

III. We shall show, that Christ offers to prisoners in a natural state, an opening of their prisons, and a bringing them out of these.

The improvement of each will be added as we proceed. We are then,

I. To shew, that Christ offers to prisoners in a natural state, an opening of their eyes, the recovery of their spiritual sight, and so to bring them from darkness unto light.

What, do such say, is in this offer? Certain it is that saving illumination is hereby offered to you; Rev. iii. 18, "I counsel thee," says he, "to anoint thine eyes with eye-salve, that thou mayest see." This is a glorious and most necessary benefit, a thousand times more necessary than light to those who are naturally blind. The

unrenewed world lie in darkness, they will not, they cannot see. There is a long and dark night upon them. Christ offers to bring a morning unto their souls, to make the day-star arise there; yea, the Sun of righteousness to shine there. There is a thick mist about you, so that you cannot see your way, but spend your life in endless wanderings among deep pits. He will, by the spirit of his mouth, dispel it, and make light to arise up, that ye may see clearly about you. Your eyes are clouded and blinded; he will make the scales to fall off from them; and this will give you a threefold sight. There is,

1. A sad and melancholy sight, the saddest ever you saw, which will make the lightest heart among us all heavy; and this is a sight of yourselves in your universal sinfulness and defilement. This pricked Peter's hearers to the heart, Acts ii. 37. It struck Paul with the paleness of death; for "I was alive," said he, "without the law once; but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died," Rom. vii. 9. Men naturally are strangers to themselves, but when the prisoner's eyes are opened, he gets a broad view of his sinful self. He sees a corrupt nature, from which no good can come; averse to good, and prone to evil; not to be changed, but by a miracle of grace; Rom. viii. 24, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" He sees a corrupt, desperately wicked heart: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?" Jer. xvii. 9. There is an emptiness of all good; a fulness of all evil, the seed and root of all abominations which are done in the world, living lusts of all kinds, like so many vermin in their nest, Mark vii. 21; a continual steam of actual sinning and lusting, arising from hence on the steam of a dunghill. Further, he sees a sinful life and conversation, woven into one continued piece of sin, where the parts sometime thought good will appear even black as hell, like the rest; unclean lips, all over defiled with vanity or vileness; an unclean life, which is unfruitful and unprofitable for God and for themselves; full of sins against the holy law of God, committed against much light and love, as well as checks by word and providence, &c. When the Lord comes to the prisoner, and opens his eyes, he takes him and leads him through his heart and life; then what a sad sight does he get! then will he cry, as in Job, xl. 4, "Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth." Then is accomplished these words, "Thine own wickedness shall correct thee, and thy backslidings shall reprove thee; know therefore, and see that it is an evil thing and a bitter that thou hast forsaken the Lord thy God, and that my fear is not in thee, saith the Lord of hosts," Jer. ii. 19. There is,

2. A terrible and frightful sight, which will make the stoutest heart to tremble, so that they shall say, as Moses did at the burning mount, "I exceedingly fear and quake." And this sight is three-fold. There is a sight of an absolute God, in the glory of his holiness and justice, Lev. x. 3. Men's eyes are naturally withheld, so that they see not what a God they have to do with, Psalm l. 21. They think he is altogether such an one as themselves; but says he, "I will reprove thee, and set them (your sins) in order before you." When their eyes are opened, they are cured of their fatal mistake; Hab. i. 13, "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity." They see him on a throne of justice, angry with the wicked every day; a hater of every sin, a severe avenger of sin from the least to the greatest, with whom no sin is accounted a small thing. There is a fiery stream issuing out of his mouth, to devour his adversaries, as engaged, by his word and nature, to magnify the law and make it honourable. This terrible sight will give the sinner experience of the psalmist's case, Psalm lxxiii. 3, "I remembered God, and was troubled; I complained, and my spirit was overwhelmed;" and hence make his heart cry out within him, as in Isa. xxxiii. 14, "Who among us shall dwell with devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings?" Again, he gets a sight of the fiery law in its absolute purity, extensiveness, and severity; Rom. vii. 9, "For I was alive without the law once; but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died." The law, to the blinded sinner, is like a looking glass covered over with dust, in which the man never sees the true shadow of himself. But when the sinner's eyes are opened, the glass is rubbed clean, and shines bright, to his terror and astonishment. Then it discovers the damnable nature of some things he thought good, the heinousness of what he reckoned small faults, and makes all his sins greater than ever he thought them. He sees the threats and curses of the law, no more as scarecrows, or as the shadows of the mountains, but more sure than heaven or earth to have their effect. And then one word of it will go deeper with him than a thousand used to do. Further, he gets a sight of himself, in his miserable, lost, and undone estate. Like the prodigal, he comes to himself, and sees that he is perishing with hunger. He sees himself to be ruined, to be a self-destroyer; a dead man in law, devoted to destruction by the curse of the law; under sentence of eternal death, pronounced by the Judge of all, and registered in the Bible; bound with the threatenings of the law, as so many cords of death; and withal, utterly unable to extricate himself out of this gulph of sin and misery; Rom. v. 6, "For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly."

3. They get a comforting and heart-reviving sight, the most comfortable they ever saw, which will make the most heavy heart joyful. And this is a sight of Christ in the glory of his mediatory office; Isa. xxxiii. 17, "Thine eyes shall see the King in his beauty, they shall behold the land that is very far off." They see Jesus standing as a Prophet, discovering those thoughts of love, which were from eternity in the breast of Christ's Father, toward these prisoners. Standing as a priest as he had been slain, at the Father's right hand, making intercession for the prisoner's freedom. And as a King, having the sovereign command of life and death, and having the keys of the prison in his hand, to take out the prisoner when he will. O glorious sight for the prisoners! when their eyes are opened. It is a threefold sight. It is a sight of the transcendent excellency and loveliness of Jesus, Isa. xxxiii. 17, (quoted above.) While the prisoner lay in darkness, he was ready to say to every lover of Christ, "What is thy beloved more than another beloved?" Cant. v. 9. There was then to him more glory in a vain world, in the lust of the eye and the pride of life, than in Christ. But now that his eyes are opened, he sees a glory in him, which darkens all created excellency, as the rising sun makes the stars to hide their heads. He appears now as the pearl of great price, Matth. xiii. 46. All the perfections of the divine glory shine forth in him; these appear in the face of Christ, as in a glass, of which the prisoner now gets a view. And then none but Christ for him; Psalm lxxiii. 25, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee." Again, he gets a sight of his fulness for, and suitableness to, the case of the prisoner. Like the prodigal, Luke xv. 17, he sees that in his father's house there is bread enough and to spare. He sees then that he needs look to no other quarter for help; that there is an all-sufficient fulness of it in Christ. Does the prisoner consider his vast debts? Christ is a cautioner, a mighty one. Does he consider his crimes? Christ died to satisfy for them. He has power over the jailor, and can bind the strong man, loose and bring out the prisoner. Is he defiled in his prison-garments? Christ has white raiment to put on him, in exchange for these. Are there iron gates in the way? yea, irons on the prisoner's legs? He breaks the bars of iron, and brings out the prisoner. Once more, he gets a sight of the willingness and readiness of Christ to communicate of his fulness; Heb. iv. 15, 16, "For we have not an high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find

grace to help in time of need." He now sees the truth and reality of gospel invitations and promises, that they are not only fair words, as he sometime thought them, but sure and tried words; Psalm xii. 6, "The words of the Lord are pure words; as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times." This revives the fainting heart, is the great cordial for a soul ready to perish; so that the prisoner resolves to venture himself, and lay his whole weight on the glorious Deliverer.

Before leaving this head, it may be of importance to inquire, what ground the blinded prisoner has to rest upon and embrace this offer in the proclamation of the gospel? As to this we observe,

1. That there is nothing offered but what our Lord can perform and make good; Numb. xxiii. 19, "God is not a man that he should lie; neither the son of man that he should repent; hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?" Jesus is the true light, the light of the world; the star that came out of Jacob, Numb. xxiv. 17; the bright and morning star, which puts an end to the dark night in the soul, Rev. xxii. 16, the sun of righteousness, Mal. iv. 2. He has a fulness of the spirit of light in him, to communicate to dark souls, Rev. iii. 1. We observe,

2. That there is nothing offered but what he has already performed in the experience of thousands, who have been Satan's close prisoners as well as you; Isa. xxxv. 4, 5, 6, "He will come and save you. Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped; then the lame man shall leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall sing; for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert." Paul was a blind Pharisee, but O how wonderfully were his eyes opened! There have been many who were as stupid, secure, and blind as any, whom the day-spring from on high hath visited; who sat in darkness, but are now turned from darkness unto light, and from the power of Satan unto God. We observe,

3. There is nothing proposed to us but what he has his Father's commission to offer and make good; Isa. xlix. 6, "And he said, Is it a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel; I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation to the ends of the earth." Ver. 9, "That thou mayest say to the prisoners, Go forth? to them that are in darkness, Shew yourselves. They shall feed in their ways, and their pastures shall be in all high places." Again, to the same purport, see Isa. xlii. 6, 7. And therefore his coming into the world is compared to the day-spring, Luke i. 78, which comes at its appointed time. We observe,

4. That what is offered is offered unto you. Ye are all comprehended in the proclamation; Isa. lv. 1, "Ho! every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters." Whatever be your case, though you be in the innermost room of satan's prison in the world, ye are men, ye are sons of men: Prov. viii. 4, "Unto you, O men! do I call, and my voice is to the sons of men." And the offer is very particular, Eph. v. 14, "Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light." We observe,

5. That there is the greatest reality, truth, and sincerity in the offer; Rev. iii. 14, "These things saith the Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the beginning of the creation of God." Never one embraced this offer who was refused. It grieves his Spirit that sinners do not fall in with it. He wept over Jerusalem for this; and he has lost no bowels of compassion by going to heaven.

This part of the subject we would improve, by urging you to embrace the offered light, the saving illumination proclaimed in the gospel; and to come to Christ with this errand, That your eyes may be opened. And here I would exhort you to the following things:—

Be convinced of your natural darkness and blindness in the things of God. Say not, with the Pharisees, Are we blind also? The less thou seest of this darkness about thee, the greater is the darkness upon thee. The best see but in part, and most men see none at all in a saving manner. Love darkness; John iii. 19, "And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil." As the owl loves not the shining sun, so men wedded to their lusts hate the light, and love to be in darkness. They do not know God, nor his law, nor his Son, nor themselves, and they care not for the knowledge of them; Job xxi. 14, "Therefore they say unto God, Depart from us; for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways." They are at little pains with their Bibles, and far less with their hearts and lives, to make them agreeable to the light of the word. Do not resist and rebel against the light, Job xxiv. 13, "They are of those who rebel against the light; they know not the way thereof, nor abide in the paths thereof." Let not your lusts carry you over the belly of what light you have, lest ye be judicially blinded. What light God offers you by his word, by providences, or by inward motions and convictions within your breasts, beware of fighting against it, beware of resisting and putting it out. Sometimes the Spirit of the Lord begins to throw in beams of light into the soul, at a sermon, under a rod, or some rebuke of providence. But the sinner cannot be easy till this be again darkened. Be satisfied with no light, which has not a sanctifying and a purifying heat with it. The true light is called the light of

life, John viii. 12. When the Spirit of the Lord fell on the disciples, Acts ii., there appeared tongues of fire, enlightening and warming. Dangerous is the case of men who keep truth a prisoner; Rom. i. 18, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven, against all ungodliness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness." *Lastly*, Go to the Lord for the Spirit of illumination. Pray, search for the same as for hid treasures, and believe for it in the Lord Jesus. Look to him that ye may be enlightened with this saving illumination of his word and Spirit. To prevail with you in all these points, I would mention the following MOTIVES:—

MOT. 1. This illumination is absolutely necessary for salvation. A sinner will never prize Christ, nor come to him, till his eyes are opened to see his sin and misery, what a just God and a strict law he has to deal with, what a precious and suitable Saviour Christ is; John iv. 10, "Jesus answered, and said unto her, If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith unto thee, give me to drink, thou wouldst have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water." While Satan keeps his prisoner bound, he will hold him fast. That which the eye sees not, the heart receives not. The danger may be very great, but when unknown the sinner is secure.

MOT. 2. Blindness under the gospel is most inexcusable; John ix. 41, "Jesus said unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin; but now ye say we see; therefore your sin remaineth." It is wilful blindness. Those who live in the dark corners of the earth, where the light of the gospel is not known, what wonder is it that they walk on in darkness? But the light of the gospel shines about us. Christ offers to enlighten us by his Spirit, Eph. v. 14. If we choose darkness rather than light, we must lay our account with our choice being our ruin, John iii. 19.

MOT. 3. Saving illumination is the only way to true comfort, and the want of it the way to utter misery; Col. i. 12, 13, "Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light, who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son." At the binding of the soul, Satan completes the security of the prisoner; and at the enlightening of him, Christ begins his deliverance. In them who are saved, the light is carried on to the light of glory. In them who are lost, the darkness is continued, till they come to endless and utter darkness. We are now,

II. To shew, that Christ offers to the prisoners a loosing of those bands wherewith they are bound.

Here it will be necessary to shew,—1. How he looses God's bands from off the prisoners. And, 2. How he takes off the devil's bands from them. Let us then,

1. Shew how he looses God's bands from off the prisoners. The unconverted sinner is God's prisoner under the bands of guilt, and of the curse of the law, which bind him over to destruction. These he looses and takes off the sinner by the application of his own blood; Zech. ix. 11, "As for thee also, by the blood of thy covenant, I have sent forth thy prisoners out of the pit wherein is no water."

Here we observe,

(1.) That Jesus purchased their freedom from these bands by his death and sufferings. Guilt is a strong tie, the curse is a heavy chain on the prisoner; in these the power of spiritual death lay. But Jesus, by his death, procured the sinner's relaxation; Gal. iii. 13, "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, having been made a curse for us." His compassion for the prisoners made him pay for them a ransom of his own blood. He took their bands of guilt and the curse upon himself, that he might loose them from off them. Now he has ransomed the prisoners, who will accept of his delivery, and has a right to loose them from their bands; justice and the law having nothing to object. We observe,

(2.) That Jesus comes in the gospel to the prison door, proclaims and makes offer of liberty to the prisoners. This he does in the text. In his name the offer is made by his messengers; his authority to loose the prisoners is asserted, Matth. xxviii. 18, "Jesus came and said unto them, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth." His ability and willingness to do it is confirmed, Heb. vii. 25, "Wherefore he is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them." They are pressed to consent to the offer; charged upon their peril to comply with it; and all this to make them willing to come away out of the prison with the deliverer. We observe,

(3.) That though the most part give a deaf ear to the gospel-call, will not believe their danger, but sit at ease in their fetters, yet some are made a willing people in a day of power; Psalm cx. 3. By the word, faith is wrought in their hearts; Rom. x. 17; even that faith whereby the soul lays hold upon, and unites with Christ, flees in under the covert of his blood, lays over the weight of all its guilt upon Jesus, believing his blood to be sufficient to take it all away, and, renouncing all other pleas, betakes itself to this; Rom. iii. 25, "Whom God has set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God." Thus this blood is applied. We observe,

(4.) That when this blood is thus applied, the chains are ordered to be taken off the prisoner; Job xxxiii. 24, "Deliver him from

going down to the pit, I have found a ransom." Yea, the chains fall off of course, since, as in Rom. viii. 1, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus." The Cautioner's payment is pled for the debtor, and he is discharged; the criminal's cause is carried by the Surety and Advocate, and he is absolved. He is under the covert of blood, therefore neither law nor justice can reach him. He is brought into the bond of the covenant of grace, and so the guilt of eternal wrath, which is the bond of the first covenant, can hold him no longer; guilt and the curse being removed, judicial hardness has no place.

2. Let us shew how Christ looses and takes off the devil's bands from the prisoners. The unconverted sinner is also the devil's prisoner; he likewise lays bands on the sinner. These are in themselves sinful lusts and practices, &c. by which he holds them as by bands. Christ looses from these by the powerful workings of his Spirit, giving them grace, which breaks their bands asunder. He gives them,

(1.) Awakening grace, which rouses them up, and bursts the bands of sloth, wherewith they were held, Eph. v. 14, (quoted above), and cures them of the fatal delusion which they were under as to their state. Like the prodigal, they come to themselves, Luke xv. 17. The sinner sleeps securely in his sins and in his chains; but the Spirit of God gives him a sound awakening, so that his rest in sin is disturbed, and he can no longer get lived at ease in his former courses. His conscience sets upon him, and sounds a terrible alarm of wrath in his ears, which ceaseth not till he has fled to Christ for refuge, and he flees without delay. Jesus gives them,

(2.) Enlightening grace, Eph. v. 14, by which the sinner gets a discovery of himself, and a discovery of God and Christ. He is brought, as it were, into a new world, in which every thing appears in other colours than it did before. The mask which Satan put upon the ways of God and the ways of sin, is pulled off, and he sees the beauty, and the excellence of religion. Thus the band of prejudice is broken, the evil and danger of the ways of sin are exposed to them, so that the sinful company he before delighted in becomes a terror to him, and he says, "Depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity, for the Lord hath heard the voice of my weeping," Psalm vi. 8. He sees the vanity and emptiness of all time's things, so that Satan can hold him no longer by this pitiful handle. Jesus gives them,

(3.) Quickening and regenerating grace, by which they receive a new principle of spiritual life; 2 Pet. i. 4, "Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises, that by these ye

might be made partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through Inst." So that the bands of death in which they were held give way, and they become new creatures; 2 Cor. v. 17, "Therefore, if any man be in Christ Jesus, he is a new creature; old things are passed away, behold all things are become new." They are endowed with a new nature, having new motions and inclinations heaven-ward; so that the band of earthly-mindedness is broken; their will is renewed; Christ becomes their choice above all, and they lay hold upon him with heart and good will, so as that the bands of unbelief give way; their hearts are softened; they get the heart of stone removed, and a heart of flesh given unto them; their affections are changed, so that they now love the things which they before hated, and now hate those lusts and sinful courses which they formerly loved. Jesus gives them,

(4.) Sanctifying grace, by which the power of sin is more and more weakened in them, and the divers lusts with which they were held are mortified, so that lusts cannot command them as they were wont to do. Sin shall not have dominion over you, for ye are not under the law, but under grace. The new principle stirs in them to the practice of holiness in all manner of life and conversation. Thus Christ, entering into the soul, strikes off the devil's bands, and sets the sinner at liberty.

As an improvement of this part of our subject, it may just be observed,

That this lets us see that none are so fast bound under guilt, or the power of sin and Satan, but they may be loosed. And therefore we have ground of hope in the most hopeless case. A sight of guilt is ready to make the awakened sinner despond; but the blood of Christ is sufficient to remove it, whatever it be; "This blood cleanseth from all sin," 1 John i. 7. Though the cords of guilt be manifold, which cannot be loosed from off the conscience by floods of tears, the most bitter mournings; yea, though above the power of men and angels; yet the blood of Christ is of infinite value and efficacy; Isa. i. 18, "Come now and let us reason together, saith the Lord; though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." In like manner as to the power of sin. The awakened sinner shall see that it is as easy for the leopard to change his spots, and the Ethiopian his colour, as for him to change his heart, or free himself from the power of sin. He will see that it is hard to get out from under the power of Satan and his own lusts. But remember, Christ is the stronger man, he can bind Satan and spoil him of his goods. There is no-

thing too hard for him to do. Grace is powerful, and will always be victorious where it once begins; it converted Paul from a persecutor into a preacher; Manasseh, who was like a lion, was changed into a lamb. Therefore look to him that ye may be loosed.

We proceed now, with the

III. General head, to shew that Christ offers to the prisoners, in a natural state, an opening of their prisons, and to bring them out.

Here I shall shew what is in this offer, 1. More generally; and then, 2. More particularly.

1. More generally, it is the bringing the sinner into a state of grace. There are two things in it. The Lord Jesus opening the sinner's prison brings him,

(1.) Out of the state of condemnation, in which he lay from his birth till that happy hour; Rom. viii. 1, "There is therefore now no condemnation to them who are in Christ Jesus." The sentence of the law condemning him to eternal death is annulled, is taken off, and can affect him no more. He is made a free man, delivered from the curse by him who was made a curse. He is brought out from under the law as a covenant of works: Rom. vi. 14, "Ye are not under the law, but under grace." Though it continues to be a rule to him, yet he is neither left to seek life by his obedience to it, nor can he any more be doomed by it to eternal death for his disobedience; the law being dead to him, and he to it, in this respect. Jesus brings him,

(2.) Out of that state of sin in which he lay all his days before, incapable of doing any thing truly good, capable of nothing but sinning. But now the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made him free from the law of sin and death, Rom. viii. 2. The prisoner in his natural state, with the rest of the world, lieth in wickedness, 1 John v. 19; like a dead man in his grave, rotting and consuming. Christ quickens the sinners, opens their graves, and brings them out from under the reigning power of sin. In the day of conversion, Christ comes to the prison door as to the grave of Lazarus, and says, as he did to him, Come forth. So the dead man lives, the prisoner comes out of the dungeon, out of a state of sin into a state of grace.

2. Let us consider what is in this offer more particularly. There are several great benefits which it proposes to us; such as,

(1.) The prisoner's debts are discharged, even to the last farthing; Col. ii. 13, "And you being dead in your sins, and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses." They were God's prisoners, and could

never come out without payment of that debt for which they were imprisoned. But the Deliverer takes all the debt on himself; he says to his father, as in Philem. 18, "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account." And so it is accounted as if they had paid it.

(2.) The prisoner's crimes are forgiven, which otherwise would have taken away his life; Isa. xxxiii. 24, "And the inhabitant shall not say, I am sick; the people that dwell therein shall be forgiven their iniquity." The prisoner's pardon is written in the blood of his Redeemer, "This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you." Heb. viii. 12, "For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more." The King's seal is appended to it, so that neither law nor justice can quarrel it; Eph. i. 13, "In whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise." This is the white stone given to him that overcometh, of which none knows the sweetness but those who have it.

(3.) The prisoner is delivered from the power of Satan, Acts xxvi. 18, they are turned from the power of Satan unto God." The jailor has no more power to keep the prisoner, nay, nor ever to bring him back; because he is not delivered by fraud, but in a legal way, by the sovereign authority of the King's Son, who has all power in heaven and earth. The demands which law and justice had on the prisoner have all been satisfied by the deliverer, therefore he can be no longer held. As to the prisoner,

(4.) His prison-garments are taken away, and he is clothed with change of raiment. The rags of his own righteousness are thrown away, and he is clothed with the fair white raiment of Christ's righteousness put on by the hand of faith, "I counsel thee," says Jesus, as in Rev. iii. 18, "to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich, and white raiment that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear." The old man with his deeds is put off, the body of sin is destroyed, and the new man is put on. The prisoner stands before his deliverer, like Joshua before the angel; Zech. iii. 3, 4, "Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and stood before the angel; and he answered and spake to them that stood before him, Take away the filthy garments from him; and unto him he said, Behold I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment."

(5.) The prisoner is brought forth into the light of God's countenance, Isa. xlix. 9, "That thou mayest say to the prisoners, Go forth; to them that are in darkness, shew yourselves. They shall

feed in the ways, and their pastures shall be in all high places." God is in Christ reconciled to him. He is no more his enemy, but the sinner's friend, his confederate in the covenant of peace. The peace is made up through the great Peace-maker, Rom. v. 1, "Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Though the world henceforth may hate him, and become his enemy, he has friendship with heaven, which may support him under all their hatred.

(6.) The prisoner is restored to all his forfeited privileges; Eph. ii. 17, "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God." As Joseph, being a slave, was brought out of the dungeon to Pharaoh's court, and made the ruler over Egypt; so in that day in which the soul is brought to the state of grace, he is freed from his slavery, brought out of prison, and advanced in the court of heaven. Like the poor and wise child out of prison, he comes to reign, as in Eccles. iv. 13, 14, for they are all made kings who are delivered by Christ. We shall shut up this subject with a practical improvement of the whole.—And this,

1. In an use of instruction.

This subject affords some lessons to us all; as,

(1.) To be living in a state of sin is the most miserable life in the world, the most miserable life out of hell. Why are all those similitudes used, of a captivity, an imprisonment, and this of the worst kind, but because no captivity, no imprisonment is sufficient to express the misery of this captivity? Therefore these similitudes are multiplied, that what is wanting in one may be made up by another. And whenever the sinner's eyes are opened to see his misery, he will see that the worst case of captives and prisoners on earth comes infinitely short of the miserable state he is in, so soon as eternity succeeds time. For,

(1.) Of all persons in the world, an unconverted person has the least ground to be joyful: John iii. 36, "And he that believeth not the Son, shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him." Some think they are young and in their bloom, and therefore they may be allowed a pleasant jovial life. Some think like him who said to his soul, "Soul, thou hast goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry." Every one who is not held down with worldly cares or crosses, is ready to take his ease, though a stranger to Christ and a state of grace. But I would say to thee as Jehu did to Joram, 2 Kings ix. 18, "What hast thou to do with peace?" Let them live joyfully, whose prison doors have been opened; they are set free, to whom God is a friend, and who are beyond

the hazard of eternal condemnation. But what reason have you to live joyfully, who are captives, prisoners, condemned criminals, and know not but this day you may be led out to the execution? If there were a drawn sword hanging over your heads wherever you went, would it not mar your mirth and jollity? The sword of God's justice is thus suspended over all those who are out of Christ.

(2.) It would be impossible for one to live at ease in an unconverted state, if they were not blind to their own hazard and misery; Luke xix. 41—43. Ye may as well bid a malefactor be easy under the sentence of death, and the sight of the gibbet, or a man hanging over a deep gulf by a slender twig, as to bid an awakened sinner be easy in his case, before he get out of it. But many are posting to destruction down the hill, and yet are very easy, because they see not the frightful case they are in. And why do they not see it, but because they shut their eyes? It is told them, but they will not believe it; so after all they are as easy as if they had been hearing an idle tale. We are instructed,

(2.) That the delivery of the sinner out of the state of nature into a state of grace, from under the guilt and reigning power of sin, is no easy business, but business of the greatest weight and difficulty, which ever the world was witness to. Consider the ransom which had to be paid for the captives and prisoners; the greatest ransom ever given by men is not once to be named with it. Silver and gold crowns and kingdoms, would not do here, but blood, even the precious blood of Christ, 1 Pet. i. 18, 19; angels nor men could not furnish it. Consider the power by which the deliverance is to be effected, no less than an infinite power can do it. What is the storming of towns, the breaking down of iron gates, and the recovering the prey from a lion, to the recovering a sinner from the power of the devil? No less than an omnipotent power can do this, Isa. xlix. 24, 25. For,

(1.) What way can men think ever to be delivered in that careless thoughtless way with which most part satisfy themselves? Luke xiii. 24, "Strive to enter in at the strait gate, for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able." Will drowsy wishes and sluggish desires, unaccompanied with suitable endeavours, do it? Will the leading of a careless life, and then begging mercy from God when they come to die, be sufficient? Will these things serve instead of the work of grace, to pluck the prey out of Satan's mouth, to knock the devil's chains off the prisoners, and set them free? By no means.

(2.) With what face can sinners delay the work of conversion to God? Is it not work hard enough to get out of Satan's grips, be-

gin as soon as we will? Will men venture to stay till he has loaded them with heavier chains, till stronger fetters of guilt be wreathed about their necks? Up, and be doing, lose no time, you will find the work already hard enough. To-day if you will hear his voice, harden not your hearts. We are instructed,

(3.) That there is no deliverance out of the state of sin and wrath but through Jesus Christ, Acts iv. 12, "Neither is there salvation in any other; for there is none other name under heaven, given among men, whereby we must be saved." Had there been another name, another person, Jesus had not been employed in this work. There was none but he who could do it; and we may add, that the worst of sinners may be delivered in and by him. There is no guilt above the efficacy of his blood, no power of sin above the efficacy of his Spirit. At the same time, without him the most blameless person who lives will be ruined for ever; John xiv. 6, "I am the way," said Jesus, "no man cometh unto the Father but by me." Death will prey upon them in time, though insensibly, and devour them for ever, to their everlasting misery. This subject instructs us,

Lastly, That none are delivered by Christ, but those who are made willing to come away with the deliverer out of their sins, and who, with the most solemn seriousness, embrace the covenant. He does not say that he will break open the prison-doors, and bring away the prisoners, sleeping or waking, willing or unwilling, careless or careful to be away. No; he deals with them in a rational way, proclaims the liberty; if they accept of it as he offers it, well and good; if they will not have it but on terms of their own making, they must remain in prison, and perish; John v. 40, "And ye will not come unto me, that ye might have life." Then,

(1.) If any be careless as to their getting out of this state, Satan is in no danger of losing them. Though the liberty be proclaimed, they trouble not themselves about the matter, further than to hear it. Satan keeps his prisoners, and Christ will never bring them away who are not made desirous to come. Having the offer of liberty, Jesus will leave the soul still in bonds, if there be not a compliance with it.

(2.) It concerns all who would be saved, deliberately to consider the gospel-offer and their own case, and make the most solemn, serious work of closing with Christ, of entering into the covenant, and transacting with the Deliverer, as upon a matter of the utmost importance. Here eternity lies at stake; if they manage it to purpose, they are happy for ever; if they mismanage it, they are undone. If the prisoner manages his business right with this Deliverer, he will be got out of prison; if he altogether miss this opportunity, he must lie still there for ever.

This subject instructs particularly those who are under bonds of which they would fain be rid, what course they are to take.

1. Those who have sometimes walked at liberty, having had their souls brought out of prison by the Redeemer's blood and Spirit; but seem to themselves now to be carried back into Satan's prison again, and feel his chains heavy upon them. The Lord sometimes suffers his own people to fall into this case, because of their careless walking, their grieving and vexing his Holy Spirit, whereby the Spirit is quenched, corruption is strengthened, and Satan gets advantage; Isa. lviii. 17, "For the iniquity of his covetousness was I wroth, and smote him; I hid me, and was wroth, and he went on frowardly in the way of his heart." What should they do in this case, but own the justice of the stroke, apply themselves to the Deliverer, who alone can loose spiritual bonds? This is the design of the dispensation; Hos. v. 15, "I will go and return to my place, till they acknowledge their offence, and seek my face; in their affliction they will seek me early." Make new application of this blood by faith, and breathe after the communications of his Holy Spirit; Isa. lviii. 18, "I have seen his ways, and will heal him; I will lead him also, and restore comforts to him and his mourners." He delivered them out of a miserable state, and will also deliver them out of their present uncomfortable condition.

2. Those who feel the bands of guilt strong upon their souls, and are ready to despond under them as bands which can never be loosed. Such should consider, that there is no exception of bands from which Christ is sent to loose; be they weak, be they strong bands, with which the sinner is bound, Christ proclaims liberty from them; and it is an intolerable affront to the Mediator's dignity, to entertain a thought of bands from which the infinite merit of his blood, and the all-powerful efficacy of his Spirit, cannot loose. The dead corpse cast into the prophet's grave was restored to life; and shall not the soul bound with the strongest fetters of death, be set free so soon as quickening virtue comes from a crucified Christ. Such, then, should labour to believe, that they may thus see the glory of God.

3. Those who feel the bands of raging and unruly lusts so strengthened by Satan and their own corruptions, that they are ready to think that there is no breaking of them. Such should consider, that our Lord often singles out those in the most hopeless condition, to make them monuments of his rich grace. Such was the case of the Corinthians, 1. Cor. vi. 9, 10, 11. In the text, those who are blinded in the prison have opening proclaimed to them. Though the heart may be agitated like a raging sea with temptations and corruptions, it will cost Jesus but a word to still them all in a mo-

ment; Isa. lvii. 19, "I create the fruit of the lips; peace, peace to him that is afar off, and to him that is near, saith the Lord, and I will heal him." The strongest lusts shall yield to the power of his grace, and the strong man flee at the rebuke of the stronger. We shall only add,

Secondly, A use of exhortation.

You who are delivered, and have been made partakers of the liberty proclaimed in the gospel, we exhort you to walk suitably to the great deliverance. If you be thus distinguished, you will prize the Deliverer above all; 1. Pet. ii. 7, "Unto you, therefore, which believe, he is precious." You will say, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none in all the earth that I desire beside thee." And the more you look back on the hazard to which you were exposed, you will love him the more. You will prize the deliverance above all which you ever met with, or can meet with in this world; "Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss, for the excellency of the knowledge of Jesus Christ my Lord." Look on this time as the time of love. You will long for the perfecting of this deliverance, and be endeavouring to get it advanced and carried on, till you be completely freed from indwelling sin; Rom. vii. 24, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" If thus distinguished, it is your duty to walk humbly and thankfully, to the praise of your Deliverer; to carry yourselves as children of light, in a holy and heavenly conversation, and to have no fellowship with the works of darkness. In short, it is your duty to be concerned for those who are still prisoners, to pity them, to pray for them, and help forward their deliverance.

As to you who are yet Satan's captives and prisoners, hasten to be loosed; while the proclamation of liberty sounds in your ears, accept of deliverance. Consider that now is the accepted time, now is the day of salvation. Now liberty is in your offer, but it will not always be so; the day comes for transporting the prisoners into another prison, where there are no offers nor possibility of escape; and how soon this may be, you know not. Refuse the liberty to-day, delay it but till to-morrow, and ye may be beyond hope. But now the captives may be loosed, the prisoners enlarged, and thus be blessed with an eternal freedom, Kiss, therefore, the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way; when his wrath is kindled but a little, blessed are all they that put their trust in him*.

* This subject was finished in the end of February, 1715.