

THE GODLY MAN'S ARK.

SERMON I.

Ps. CXIX. 92.

“ Unless thy law had been my delights, I should then have perished in mine affliction.”

THIS psalm, out of which my text is taken, exceeds all the other psalms, not only in length, but in excellency, so far, in the judgment of Ambrose, as the light of the sun excels the light of the moon. As the Book of Psalms is styled by Luther an epitome of the Bible, or, a little Bible; so may this psalm fitly be called an epitome of the Book of Psalms. It was written, as is thought, by David in the

A

days of his banishment under Saul ; but so penned, that the words thereof suit the condition of all saints. It is a public storehouse of heavenly doctrines, distributing fit and convenient instructions to all the people of God ; and therefore should be in no less account with those who are spiritually alive, than is the use of the sun, air, and fire with those who are naturally alive. It is divided into two-and-twenty sections, according to the Hebrew alphabet, and therefore fitly called a holy alphabet for Zion's scholars, the A B C of godliness. Sextus Senensis calls it an alphabetical poem. The Jews are said to teach it their little children the first thing they learn, and therein they take a very right course, both in regard of the heavenly matter, and plain style fitted for all capacities. The chief scope of it is to set out the glorious excellences and perfections of the law of God. There is not a verse (except one only, say some learned men, in print, but are therein deceived, but I

may truly say, except the 122d and the 123d verses) in this long psalm, wherein there is not mention made of the law of God, under the name of law, or statutes, or precepts, or testimonies, or commandments, or ordinances, or word, or promises, or ways, or judgments, or name, or righteousness, or truth, &c.

This text that I have chosen, sets out the great benefit and comfort which David found in the law of God in the time of his affliction. It kept him from perishing. "Had not thy law been my delights, I had perished in my affliction."

The word "law" is taken diversely in Scripture, sometimes for the moral law, (James ii. 10;) sometimes for the whole economy, polity, and regimen of Moses, for the whole Mosaic dispensation, by laws partly moral, partly judicial, partly ceremonial, (Gal. iii. 23;) sometimes for the five books of Moses, (Luke xxiv. 44;) sometimes for the whole doctrine of God contained in the Scriptures of

the Old Testament, (John vii. 49.) By law in this place is meant, all those books of the Scripture which were written when this psalm was penned. But I shall handle it in a larger sense, as it comprehends all the books both of the Old and the New Testament. For the word "law" is sometimes also taken for the gospel, as it is Micah iv. 2, Isa. ii. 3. The meaning then is, "Unless thy law," that is, "Thy Word, had been my delights, I should have perished in mine affliction."

David speaks this, saith Musculus, of the distressed condition he was in when persecuted by Saul, forced to fly to the Philistines, and sometimes to hide himself in the rocks and caves of the earth. It is very likely, saith he, that he had the Book of God's Law with him, by the reading of which he mitigated and allayed his sorrows, and kept himself pure from communicating with the heathen in their superstitions. The Greek scholiasts say that David uttered these words

when driven from Saul and compelled to live amongst the wicked Philistines; for he would have been allured to have communicated with them in their impieties, had he not carried about him the meditation of the Word of God. "Unless thy law had been my delights," &c.

In the words themselves we have two truths supposed, and one truth clearly proposed.

I. Two truths supposed :

1. That the dearest of God's saints are subject to many great and tedious afflictions.

2. That the Word of God is the saints' darling and delights.

One truth clearly proposed :

That the law of God delighted in, is the afflicted saint's antidote against ruin and destruction.

I. Two truths supposed :

The first is this—

Doct. 1. That the best of God's

saints are in this life subject to many great and tedious afflictions.

David was a man after God's own heart, and yet he was a man made up of troubles of all sorts and sizes, inso-much as he professeth of himself, (Psa. lxi. 1-3,) "Save me, O God, for the waters are come in unto my soul; I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing; I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me; I am weary of my crying, my throat is dried, mine eyes fail while I wait for my God." And in this text he professeth that his afflictions were so great, that he must necessarily have perished under them had he not been sustained by the powerful comforts he fetched out of the Word. There is an emphasis in the word "then." "I should then have perished;" that is, long before this time; "then," when I was afflicted, then I should have perished. Junius and Tremelius translate it, I should long ago have perished. Job was a man eminent for

godliness, and yet as eminent for afflictions. Nay, Jesus Christ himself was a man of sorrows, (Isa. liii. 3.) Inso-much as that it is truly said, "God had one Son without sin, but no Son without sorrow."

This our dear sister, at whose funeral we are met, was a woman full of many and great afflictions, which (no doubt) would have quite drowned and swallowed her up, had not the Word of God supported her; therefore it was that she desired that this text might be the subject of her funeral sermon.

Quest. But why doth God afflict His own children with such variety of long and great afflictions?

Ans. 1. God doth not do this because He hates them, but because He loves them, "For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth," &c., (Heb. xii. 6.) Did the Lord hate them, He would suffer them to go merrily to hell. There is no surer sign of God's reprobating anger, than to suffer a man

to prosper in wicked courses. God threateneth this as the greatest punishment, not to punish them, (Hos. iv. 14.) And therefore because God loveth His children He chastiseth them in this world that they may not be condemned in the world to come, (1 Cor. xi. 32.)

2. God doth not do this because He would hurt them, but for their good. The good figs were sent into captivity for their good, (Jer. xxiv. 5.) He for our profit, &c. (Heb. xii. 10.) God hath very gracious and merciful ends and aims in afflicting His people. Give me leave here to enlarge my discourse, and to give you an account of some of these Divine aims.

I. God's design is to teach us to know Him and to trust in Him, and to know ourselves. It is a true saying of Luther's—The school of affliction is a school of instruction. God's rods, when sanctified, are powerful sermons to teach us,

1. To know God. And this is life

eternal to know Him, (John xvii. 3.) It is said of Manasseh, (2 Chron. xxxiii. 13,) "Then Manasseh knew that the Lord he was God"—then, when he was caught among the thorns, bound with fetters, and carried to Babylon. Before that time he knew not the Lord. Afflictions teach us to know God, and not only in His power and greatness, in His anger and hatred against sin, but also in His goodness and mercy. For God doth so sweeten the bitter cup of affliction, that a child of God doth many times taste more of God's love in one month's affliction than in many years of prosperity, (2 Cor. i. 4, 5, vii. 4.) Add to this, afflictions teach us to know God experimentally and affectionately; so to know Him, as to love and fear Him, and to fly unto Him as our rock and hiding-place in the day of our distress. It is said, (Cant. iii. 1,) "By night I sought him whom my soul loveth," &c. Some by the word "night" understand the night of Divine desertion;

and from the words, Gilbertus hath this saying—He that seeks after God in the night of adversity, doth not seek to see Him and know Him formally and superficially, but to embrace Him, and to love Him really and cordially. And, therefore, the Church never left till she had found Christ, and when she had found Him, she held Him, and would not let Him go, (Cant. iii. 2-4.)

2. Not only to know God, but also to trust in Him, (2 Cor. i. 9,) “ We had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God, which raiseth the dead.” Note here, (1.) That an apostle is apt in time of prosperity to trust in himself; (2.) That God brings His children to the gates of death, that they might learn not to trust in themselves, but in God, who raiseth the dead, that is, from a dead and desperate condition.

3. Not only to know God, but to know ourselves, which two are the

chief parts of Christian religion. It is said of the prodigal, that when he was in adversity, then he "came to himself"—(Luke xv. 17,) "And when he came to himself." He was spiritually distracted when he was in prosperity. Afflictions teach us to know that we are but men, according to that of David, (Ps. ix. 20,) "Put them in fear, O Lord, that they may know themselves to be but men." Caligula and Domitian, emperors of Rome, who in prosperity would be called gods, when it thundered from heaven were so terrified, that then they knew they were but men. In prosperity we forget our mortality. Adversity causeth us to know, not only that we are men, but frail men, that God hath us between His hands, (as it is Ezek. xxi. 17,) and can as easily crush us as we do moths; that we are in God's hands, as the clay in the hands of the potter; that He hath an absolute sovereignty over us, and that we depend upon Him for our

being, well-being, and eternal being; these things we know feelingly and practically in the day of affliction. And it much concerns us to know these things, and to know them powerfully; for this will make us stand in awe of God, and study to serve and please Him. He that depends upon a man for his livelihood, knowing that he hath him at an advantage, and can easily undo him, will certainly endeavour to comply with him, and to obtain his favour. The ground of all service and obedience is dependence. And did we really and experimentally know our dependence upon God, and the advantages He hath over us, we could not, we would not but comply with Him, and labour above all things to gain His love and favour.

II. God's aim in afflicting His children, is either to keep them from sin, or, when they have sinned, to bring them to repentance for it, and from it.

1. To keep them from sin. This

made Him send an angel of Satan to buffet Paul, lest he should be lifted up in pride, and exalted above measure, (2 Cor. xii. 7.)

2. When they have sinned, to bring them to repentance for it, and from it. The second design of God in afflicting His children. God brings His children low, not to trample upon them, but to make them low in their own eyes, and to humble them for sin, (Deut. viii. 2.) God brings them into the deep waters, not to drown them, but to wash and cleanse them. (Isa. xxvii. 9,) "By this shall the iniquity of Jacob be purged; and this is all the fruit to take away sin," &c. Afflictions, when sanctified, are Divine hammers to break, and as Moses' rod, to cleave our rocky hearts in pieces.

(1.) They open the eyes to see sin. When the brethren of Joseph were in adversity then they saw, and not before, the greatness of their sin in selling their brother, (Gen. xlii. 21.)

(2.) They open the ear to discipline. In prosperity we turn a deaf ear to the

voice of the Charmer, though He charm never so wisely. But adversity openeth the ear, and causeth us to attend. When God spake upon Mount Sinai in a terrible manner, then the people said unto Moses: "Speak thou unto us all that the Lord our God shall speak unto thee, and we will hear it and do it," (Deut. v. 27.) Memorable is that text, (Jer. ii. 24.) "A wild ass used to the wilderness, that snuffeth up the wind at her pleasure, in her occasion who can turn her away? All they that seek her will not weary themselves, in her month they shall find her;"—"in her month," that is, when she is great with young, and near her time. A wicked man in the day of his prosperity is like a wild ass used to the wilderness: he snuffeth at any that shall reprove him, he is of an uncircumcised ear, and a rebellious heart; but in his month, that is, when he is bent with afflictions, then he will be easily found; this will open his ear to discipline:

(3.) They will open the mouth to confess sin, (Judges x. 15.)

(4.) They will command us to depart from iniquity, (Job xxxvi. 8-10.)

Afflictions are God's furnaces to purge out the dross of our sins; God's files to pare off our spiritual rust; God's fans to winnow out our chaff. In prosperity we gather much soil, but adversity purgeth and purifieth us. This is its proper work, to work out unrighteousness, (Dan. xi. 35, xii. 10.)

3. God's end is not only to keep us The third design. from sin, but to make us holy and righteous; therefore it is said, (Isa. xxvi. 9,) "When thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness." And Heb. xii. 10, "He for our profit, that we may be partakers of his holiness." As the waters that drowned the old world did not hurt the ark of Noah, but bare it up above the earth, and as they increased, so the ark was lifted up nearer and nearer to heaven; so afflictions,

when sanctified, do not prejudice the saints of God, but lift them up nearer unto God in holiness and heavenly-mindedness.

The fourth design.

4. God's design in afflicting His children, is to make the world bitter unto them and Christ sweet.

(1.) To embitter the world. There are two lame legs upon which all worldly things stand, uncertainty and insufficiency. All earthly things are like the earth, founded upon nothing; they are like heaps made of wax, that quickly melt away. Riches and honours, wife and children, have wings and fly away; they are like unto Absalom's mule, they will fail us when we have most need of them. They may puff up the soul, but they cannot satisfy it. They are all vanity and vexation of spirit, so saith the preacher; but most people in time of health will not believe these things; but when some great sickness betides them, this is as a real sermon, to make out the truth of them; then they see

that a velvet slipper cannot cure the gout, nor a golden cap the headache; that riches avail not in the day of wrath, (Prov. x. 4;) and this embitters the world.

(2.) To make Christ sweet and precious. When Christ and His disciples were in a ship together, (Matt. viii. 25,) it is said that Christ was asleep; and as long as the sea was calm His disciples suffered Him to sleep, but when they were ready to be drowned, then they awoke Christ, and said, "Master, save us, we perish." Even the best of saints when fatted with outward plenty and abundance, are prone to suffer Christ to lie asleep within them, and so neglect the lively actings of faith upon Christ; but when the storms of affliction and outward calamity begin to arise, and they are ready to be overwhelmed with distress, then—none but Christ—none but Christ.

5. God's design in afflicting His children is to prove and improve their graces.

B

(1.) To prove their graces, (Rev. ii. 10, Deut. viii. 2,) to prove the truth and the strength of them. 1. The truth and sincerity of their graces. For this cause He loaded Job with afflictions, to try whether he served God for his camels and oxen, or for love to God. As Solomon's sword tried the true mother from the false; so the sword of affliction discovers the sincere Christian from the hypocrite. Distresses are Divine touchstones to try whether we be true or counterfeit saints. That grace is true which upon trial is found true. 2. To try the strength of our graces. For it requires a strong faith to endure great afflictions. That faith which will suffice for a little affliction, will not suffice for a great one. Peter had faith enough to come to Christ upon the sea, but as soon as the storm began to arise his faith began to fail, and Christ said, "Why art thou afraid, O thou of little faith?" (Matt. xiv. 30, 31.) It must

be a strong faith that must keep us from sinking in the day of great distress.

(2.) To improve our graces. It is reported of the lioness that she leaves her young ones till they have almost killed themselves with roaring and howling, and then at the last gasp she relieves them, and by this means they become more courageous. So God brings His children into the deeps, and suffers Jonah to be three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, and David to cry till his throat was dry, (Ps. lx. 3;) and suffers His apostles to be all the night in a great storm till the fourth watch, and then He comes and rebukes the winds, and by this means He mightily increaseth their patience and dependence upon God, and their faith in Christ. As the palm-tree, the more it is depressed, the higher, stronger, and fruitfuller it grows, so doth the grace of God's people.

Lastly, God's aim in afflicting His

people is to put an edge upon their prayers, and all their other holy services.

(1.) Upon prayer. What a famous prayer did Manasseh make when he was under his iron fetters. It is thrice mentioned, (2 Chron. xxxiii. 13, 18, 19.) When Paul was struck off his horse, and struck with blindness, then he prayed to purpose. Therefore it is said, (Acts ix. 11,) "Behold he prayeth!" In prosperity we pray heavily and drowsily, but adversity adds wings to our prayers, (Isa. xxvi. 16.) The very heathen mariners cried aloud to God in a storm. It is an ordinary saying, There are no sailors so wicked but they will pray when in a great storm.

(2.) Upon preaching. Prosperity glutteth the spiritual appetite, adversity whetteth it.

(3.) Upon a sacrament. How sweet is a sacrament to a true saint after a long and great sickness?

It makes God and the Word of God precious. If God sets our cornfields on

fire, (as Absalom did Joab's,) then He shall be sure to cause us to come running to Him. And how sweet is a text of Scripture to a child of God in the hour of his distress!

By all this it appears that God afflicts His children not to hurt them, but to help them, and that God hath many glorious and gracious ends and aims in afflicting of them. Therefore it is that David saith of himself in ver. 71 of this psalm, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes." He never said, It is good for me that I have been in prosperity; but he rather saith the contrary in the 67th verse, "Before I was afflicted, I went astray, but now I have kept thy word." God's people will bless God as much, if not more, in heaven for their adversity, than for their prosperity.

Use 1. Let us not pass rash censures upon persons under great afflictions. Say not, Such a woman is a greater sinner than others, because more af-

flicted. This was the fault of Job's friends, and God expresseth His anger against them for it, (Job xlii. 7,) "My wrath is kindled against thee, and thy two friends, for you have not spoken the thing that is right," &c. This was the fault of the barbarians, (Acts xxviii. 4,) "When they saw the venomous beast hang upon the hand of Paul, they said among themselves, No doubt this man is a murderer," &c. But remember they were barbarians. It is a sign of a barbarian, not of a Christian, to pass a rash censure upon persons in affliction. "Think you," saith Christ, "that those eighteen upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and slew them, that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay; but except you repent, ye shall all likewise perish," (Luke xiii. 4, 5.) Think you that they which have the stone and gout in extremity, that have cancers in their faces and breasts, are greater sinners than others? I tell you

nay, &c. For my part, if I would censure any, it should be such as live wickedly, and meet with no affliction; these have the black brand of reprobation upon them; these are men designed to damnation. Ambrose would not tarry a night in the house of a gentleman that had never in all his life been afflicted, for fear, as he said, lest some great and sudden judgment should be-tide it. But when I see a godly woman afflicted, then I say, This is not so much for her sin, as for her trial; this is not to hurt her, but to teach her to know God, and to know herself, to break her heart for sin, and from sin, to make the world bitter, and Christ sweet. God hath put her into the fire of affliction to refine her, and make her a vessel fit for His use. God is striking her with the hammer of affliction, that she may be squared, and made ready to be laid in the heavenly Jerusalem.

Use 2. Here is rich comfort to the children of God under the greatest afflic-

tions. For the best of saints are subject to the worst afflictions. This is the lot of all God's children, Christ himself not excepted. Afflictions, indeed, considered in their own nature, are evil things, and so are called, (Amos v. 13.) They are part of the curse due to sin, the fruit of God's revenging wrath; they are as a biting and stinging serpent; and to a wicked man, remaining wicked, they are the beginning of hell. Unsanctified afflictions parboil a wicked man for hell and damnation. But now to a child of God, they have lost both their name and nature, they are not punishments properly, but chastisements; they are not satisfactory, but castigatory. Jesus Christ hath taken away the sting of these serpents; they are not fiery but brazen serpents; they have a healing, not a hurting power. Christ hath removed the curse and bitterness of them. As the wood sweetened the waters of Marah, (Exod. xv. 25,) so Christ's cross hath sweetened the bitterness of afflictions.

There are eight comfortable considerations to cheer the heart of a child of God in the day of his distress.

1. God never afflicts His people but out of pure necessity, (1 Pet. ii. 6,) "Though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness"—as a most loving father never corrects his child, but when he is forced to it. He willingly provides for his child, but punisheth him unwillingly; so God freely loadeth with His blessings, but He never chastiseth His children but when forced to it; therefore He saith expressly, (Lam. iii. 23,) "He doth not afflict willingly;" (Isa. xxvii. 1,) "Fury is not in me." It is we that put thunderbolts in God's hand. If the sun did not first draw up the vapours from the earth, there would never be any thundering or lightning. God would never thunder from heaven with His judgments, if our sins did not first cry to heaven for punishment. As Christ whipped the sellers of oxen and sheep out of the temple with a whip

made, in all probability, of their own cords; so God never scourgeth us, but it is with a whip made out of our own sins; (Prov. v. 22; Rom. ii. 5,) "Thou treasurest up to thyself," &c. God hath a double treasure, a treasure of mercy, and a treasure of wrath; His treasure of mercy is always full, but His treasure of wrath is empty, till we fill it by our sins. And therefore when God punisheth His children, He calls it a strange work, and a strange act, (Isa. xxviii. 21.) It is observed of the bee that it never stings but when provoked. Sure I am, that God never afflicts His children but out of pure necessity.

2. Not only out of pure necessity, but out of true and real love; as I have showed, (Heb. xii. 6-8.)

Object. Do not Divine afflictions proceed out of anger? Was not God angry with Moses for speaking unadvisedly with his lips? And angry with David for his adultery, and thereupon afflicted both of them?

Ans. This anger was a fatherly anger rooted in love. As it is a great punishment for God sometimes not to punish, (Isa. i. 5; Hos. iv. 14,) so it is a great mercy sometimes for God to withdraw His mercy.

3. Afflictions are a part of Divine predestination. That God which hath elected us to salvation hath also elected us unto afflictions, (1 Thes. i. 2,) “That no man should be moved by these afflictions; for you yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto.” The same love with which God elects us, and bestoweth Christ and His Spirit upon us, with the very same love He afflicts us.

4. They are part of the gracious covenant which God hath made with His people, (Ps. lxxxix. 31-33.) In which words we have three things considerable.

(1.) A supposition of sin. If his children forsake my law, &c. For sin is always the cause without which God will never chastise us; and for the most

part it is the cause for which He doth chastise us.

(2.) We have a gracious promise : “Then I will visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes.”

(3.) We have a merciful qualification : “Nevertheless my loving-kindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to fail; my covenant will I not break,” &c. Afflictions are not only mercies, but covenant mercies; therefore David saith, (Ps. cxix. 75,) “And that thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me.” God would be unfaithful if He did not afflict His children.

5. Consider that afflictions are part of the saint's blessedness. (Job v. 17,) “Behold! happy is the man whom God correcteth,” &c. “Behold,” saith Eliphaz, and we had need behold, and consider it, for there are few that believe it; and yet it is most true, that afflictions, when sanctified, when they

are not only corrections, but instructions, then they are evidences that we are in a blessed condition. Eliphaz's saying must be interpreted by what David saith, (Ps. xciv. 12,) "Blessed is the man whom thou chastisest, O Lord, and teachest out of thy law : " it is not correction simply, but correction joined with instruction, which entitles us to happiness. Job even while he was upon the dunghill, wonders that God should set His heart so much upon him, as to visit him every morning, and to try him every moment, (Job vii. 17, 18.) Job upon the dunghill was happier than Adam in Paradise : Adam in Paradise was conquered by the devil ; but Job upon the dunghill overcame the devil. Lazarus in his rags was happier than Dives in his robes ; Philpot in his coal-house, than Bonner in his palace ; and godly Mr Whitaker upon his bed of pain, than a wicked man upon his bed of down. There were many in Christ's time who would never have known

Him, or come to Him, had it not been for their bodily diseases.

6. Consider the gracious and merciful ends, aims, and designs that God hath in afflicting His people; what these are ye have heard already.

7. The sweet and precious promises, which He hath made to His children in the day of their adversity, to comfort them and support them; what these are you shall hear afterwards.

8. Consider that all afflictions shall work at last for the good of God's children, (Rom. viii. 28.) Though they are not good in themselves, yet they shall turn to their good. God beats His children, as we do our clothes in the sun, only to beat out the moths; God puts them into the fiery furnace, not to hurt them, but only to untie the bonds of their sins; as He dealt with the three children, (Dan. iii. 25,) God will either deliver them out of their afflictions, or send them to heaven by

them ; wherefore comfort one another with these words.

Use 3. If the best of saints are subject in this life unto many great and tedious afflictions, then let us

1. Expect afflictions.
2. Prepare for them.
3. Improve them.

1. Let us expect afflictions ; for Christ hath said expressly, (John xvi. 33,) “ In the world ye shall have tribulation.” There is in every child of God—

(1.) A sufficient foundation for God to build a house of correction upon. There is sin enough to deserve affliction.

(2.) There are motives sufficient to prevail with God to chastise them when they sin against Him ; some of these you have heard already, let me add one more : Because He is more dishonoured by the sins of His own children than by the sins of wicked men. As it is a greater

discredit to an earthly father when his own children, than when other men's children, live wickedly ; so it is a greater disparagement to our heavenly Father when His own sons and daughters, than when the devil's children transgress His law : and, therefore, God will chastise them sooner, surer, and more than others. 1. Sooner : (Rom. ii. 9,) "Tribulation and anguish upon every soul of man that doeth evil, of the Jew first, and also of the Gentile." First the Jew, and then the Gentile. 2. Surer than others : (Amos iii. 2,) "You only have I known of all the families of the earth, therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities." 3. More than others : (Lam. iv. 6,) "The punishment of the iniquity of the daughter of my people is greater than the punishment of the sin of Sodom," &c. ; (Dan. ix. 12,) "Under the whole heaven hath not been done, as hath been done upon Jerusalem."

(3.) There is sufficient necessity to

provoke God to afflict them. It is needful that the wheat be winnowed, that so the chaff may be separated from it. It is needful that the wind blow upon the wheat, to cleanse it, and that gold be put into the furnace, to purge and purify it. When the sheep of Christ are divided one from the other in judgment and afflictions, when separated in doctrine, worship, and discipline, it is very needful that God should send afflictions and distresses, which may be, as the shepherd's dog, very serviceable and instrumental to unite them together, and to gather them into one sheepfold; and therefore let the saints of God expect afflictions.

2. Let us prepare and provide against the day of tribulation. Let us provide,

(1.) A stock of graces. For sickness is a time to spend grace, but not to get grace. A Christian in sickness without grace is like a soldier in war without armour; like a house in stormy weather without a foundation; and like the

God's people are to prepare for afflictions.

(1.) A stock of graces.

c

men of the old world, when ready to be drowned, without an ark. Woe be to that person that hath his graces to get when he should use them! And therefore if we would be comforted in the day of tribulation, we must provide aforehand a furniture of graces.

1st. A true faith, (for a painted faith will avail no more than a painted helmet, or a painted ship,) and not only a true but also a strong faith. A little faith will faint under great afflictions; when the winds began to blow fiercely Peter's little faith began to fail, (Matt. xiv. 30.)

2d. A great measure of patience, to enable us to wait quietly and contentedly, till God come in with help, for many times He tarrieth till the fourth watch of the night, as He did in Matt. xiv. 25; and therefore we have need of patience to keep us from murmuring or repining.

3d. A great stock of self-denial, humility, repentance, contempt of the world, and heavenly-mindedness, He

that is furnished with grace in an evil hour, will be as safe and secure as Noah was in the ark in the time of the deluge, or as those were who had sufficiency of corn in the time of the seven years' dearth in Egypt.

(2.) A stock of assurance of salvation. For though a man hath never so much grace, yet if he wants the assurance of it, he cannot receive any comfort by it in the day of his distress. Jacob was not at all quieted in his spirit for Joseph's being alive till he came to know of it; and therefore we must not only provide grace, but the assurance of grace, that we may be able to say with confidence, as Job did upon the dung-hill, (Job xix. 25,) "I know that my Redeemer liveth;" and with the holy apostle, (Rom. viii. 38,) "I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us

(2.) A stock
of assurance.

from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." That man who hath got a Scripture assurance of his salvation, will be more than a conqueror in the day of his distress.

(3.) A stock of divine experiences.

Happy is that man that lodgeth up in his heart all the former experiences he hath had of God's love and mercy towards him, and knoweth how to argue from them in the day of calamity. Thus did Moses in his prayer to God, (Numb. xiv. 19,) " Pardon, I beseech thee, the iniquity of this people, according unto the greatness of thy mercy, and as thou hast forgiven this people from Egypt, even until now!" Because God had forgiven them, therefore Moses entreats Him to forgive them; this argument is drawn from former experience. And thus David encourageth himself, (1 Sam. xvii. 37,) " The Lord hath delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, and he will deliver me out of the

hand of this Philistine." Thus also Paul reasoneth, (2 Cor. i. 10,) "Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver, and in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us." Divine experiences are the saints' great encouragements in the day of affliction. Blessed is the man that hath his quiver full of these arrows.

(4.) A stock of sermons. We must do with sermons as the tradesmen do with the money they get; some of it they lay out for their present use, and some of it they lay up against the time of sickness. That man is an ill husband, and an unthrifty tradesman that makes no provision for old age or for an evil day; and that man is an unprofitable hearer of the word, who doth not stock and store himself with sermons, whereby he may be comforted in the hour of affliction. And therefore the prophet Isaiah adviseth us, (Isa. xlii. 23,) "To hear for the time to come," or, as it is in the Hebrew, "for

(4.) A stock
of sermons

the after-time." Sermons are not only to be heard for our present use, but to be laid up for after-times, that when we lie upon our sick-beds, and cannot hear sermons, we may then live upon the sermons we have heard.

5.) A stock of Scripture promises.

(5.) And lastly, we must prepare and provide a stock of Scripture promises, which will be as so many reviving cordials, to cheer us, and as so many spiritual anchors, to uphold us from perishing in the day of our tribulation. What these promises are you shall hear afterwards. These upheld David in the hour of his distress, and therefore he saith in the text, "Unless thy law had been my delight, I had perished in mine affliction." If this our dear sister had not had this stock, she had been quite overwhelmed under the grievousness of her tormenting pains. Be wise, therefore, O ye saints of God, and prepare these five provisions in the time of health, that so you may live joyfully in the time of sickness.

3. As we must expect and provide for afflictions, so also we must labour, when afflicted, to improve them for our spiritual benefit and advantage. We must pray more for the sanctification of them, than for their removal. It was not the staff of Elisha that revived the dead child, but Elisha himself. It was not the troubling of the waters of the pool of Bethesda that made them healing, but the coming down of the angel. It was not the clay and spittle that cured the eyes of the blind, but Christ's anointing them with it. It was not the cloak of Elijah that divided the waters, but the God of Elijah. Troubles, strokes, blows, afflictions, and distresses will do us no good unless the Lord be pleased to make them effectual; and therefore let us pray unto God that He would give us grace together with our afflictions; that He would add instruction to His correction, that He would make us good scholars in the school of afflictions, and enable us to

3. God's people are to improve afflictions.

take out all those excellent lessons which He would have us to learn in it, that thereby he may come to know God more powerfully and experimentally, and to know ourselves and our own family, and our absolute dependence upon God more effectually; that thereby we may be more purified and refined, that the wind of temptation may cleanse us from the chaff of our corruption; that we may learn righteousness by God's judgments, and be made partakers of His holiness. Such a good scholar was Manasseh; he got more good by his iron chain than by his golden chain. Such another was the prodigal child, who was happier amongst the swine than when in his father's house. Such was Paul; his being stricken down to the ground, raised him up to heaven; by the blindness of his body his soul received sight; and he was turned from a persecuting Saul to a persecuted Paul. Such another was David, who professeth of himself that it was good

for him that he was afflicted ; and such scholars ought we to be.

There are some that are arrant dunces in this school, that are like unto the bush which Moses saw, which burned with fire, but was not consumed ; the fire did not consume the thorny bush. Many such thorny sinners are burnt up with the fire of divine afflictions, but their sins are not consumed. Of these the prophets complain, (Amos iv. 6-12,) " Yet they have not returned," &c. ; (Jer. v. 3,) " Thou hast stricken them, but they have not grieved ; thou hast consumed them, but they have refused to receive correction ; they have made their faces harder than a rock, they have refused to return." Rocks and stones, by hewing and polishing, may be made fit for a building ; but there are some men who by no afflictions will be amended. The mountains melt at the presence of the Lord, and the rocks rend asunder when He is angry. But there are some that have made their faces harder than

the rocks and the mountains, and are not at all affected with God's anger.

There are others that are the worse for their afflictions; like the smith's anvil, the more they are stricken, the harder they are: such a one was King Ahaz, (2 Chron. xxviii. 20:) "In the time of his distress he did trespass yet more against the Lord." There is a brand put upon him. This is that King Ahaz, that wicked King Ahaz, that reprobate King Ahaz. As pearls put in vinegar lose their colour and beauty, so many, when under God's hand, lose all their glory and excellency, and begin to distrust God's providence, to call His justice into question, to murmur and repine against God's dealings, and to use unlawful means for their deliverance. Of these the prophet Isaiah complains, (Isa. i. 5,) "Why should you be stricken any more? Ye will revolt more and more." Such was Ahaziah, (2 Kings i. 2,) that sought for help from Baalzebub, the god of

Ekron ; and such was Saul, who sought to the witch of Endor for health in the day of his distress.

Both of these sorts are in a sad and miserable condition : for God hath two furnaces, the furnace of affliction and the furnace of hell-fire. If the first furnace will not purge us, the second will everlastingly consume us. As the Roman consuls had a man appointed to go before them, carrying a rod and an axe ; a rod for the punishing of corrigible offenders, an axe for the destruction of incorrigible ; so God hath His rod and His axe, His pruning-knife and His chopping-knife, His warning-piece and His murdering-pieces. Afflictions are His rods to correct us for our sin ; His pruning-knife, to pare off our luxuriant branches ; His warning-pieces to call upon us to repent.

But if His warning-pieces will do us no good, we must expect His murdering-pieces. If His pruning-knife will not amend us, His chopping-knife will

confound us. If His rods will not reclaim us, then His axe will hew us down, and cast us into everlasting fire. God hath three houses, the house of instruction, of correction, and of destruction. The place where God's people meet to hear His Word, is His house of instruction; and if we profit in this house, He will never carry us unto the house of correction. But if we be stubborn and rebellious in the house of instruction, then He will send us to the house of correction; and if we profit in this house, He will never send us into the house of destruction: but if we continue incorrigible in the house of correction, He will inevitably send us to the house of destruction, that is, unto hell-fire.

And, therefore, whensoever God brings us into the school of affliction, let us labour to be good scholars in it, and to answer all those ends, aims, and designs which God hath in afflicting of us. Let us pray to God that our afflic-

tions may be divine hammers to break our hearts for sin, and from sin; may make the world bitter, and Christ more precious; may prove and improve our graces, and may put an edge upon all holy duties.

There are two things I would have you in an especial manner to labour after:—

1. Labour, when afflicted, to know the meaning of God's rod.

2. That the good you get by afflictions may abide upon you after your recovery from them.

1. You must labour to know the meaning of God's rod, and what the particular errand is which He hath to you in the day of your distresses; you must do as David did, (2 Sam. xxi. 1.) He inquired of the Lord to know the reason why He sent a famine amongst them. So must you, you must pray as Job doth, (Job x. 2,) "Show me, O Lord, wherefore thou contendest with me?" When the cause of a disease is

God's people
are to labour
to know the
meaning of
God's rod.

found out, it is half cured. Your great care, therefore, must be to study to know the particular cause and reason why God turns your prosperity into adversity. The prophet Micah tells us, (Micah vi. 9,) "That the rod hath a voice," and that the "man of wisdom shall see God's name upon it." There is a great measure of spiritual art and wisdom required to enable a man to hear this voice, and to understand the language of it. A spiritual fool cannot do it.

How we may know the meaning of God's rod.

Quest. What must we do, that we may understand the voice of the rod?

Ans. You must know that the rod of God ordinarily speaks three languages; it is sent for correction for sin, for the trial and exercise of grace, and for instruction in holiness. Sometimes, indeed, it is sent only for trial and instruction, and not at all for sin. Upon this account was Job afflicted, and the blind man, (Job ix. 3.) But for the most part it hath a threefold voice; it

is appointed for instruction, probation, and also for correction, (Lam. iii. 39; Isa. xlii. 24; Luke i. 20; 1 Cor. xi. 30.)

Quest. How shall a man know whether his afflictions be only for trial and instruction, and not at all for sin?

Ans. The safest and best way for a Christian in this case, is to believe that all his afflictions are both for trial and instruction, and also for sin: indeed, when he seeth another man, who is very godly, grievously diseased, he may charitably believe that this is for his trial, and not for his sin; but when it is his own case, then (as Dr Ames saith most excellently) "It is most equal, most safe, and most acceptable to God, to have an eye upon our sins, which have either directly procured them, or at least deserved them. For though afflictions are not always sent directly and especially for sin, yet sin is the original and foundation of all afflictions."

Quest. What course must we take

to find out what that sin is in particular for which God corrects us?

How to find out the particular sin for which God afflicts us.

Ans. 1. Sometimes we may read our sin in our punishment. Adonibezek, though a heathen king, did this, (Judg. I. 7,) "Threescore and ten kings, having their thumbs and their great toes cut off, gathered their meat under my table; as I have done, so God hath requited me." I read of holy Ephraim, that he was converted by the suitability of his affliction unto the sin he had committed, for he saw clearly that his misery came not by chance, but from God immediately, and for sin. As a man may sometimes gather the disease of the patient by observing the physician's bill; so he may guess at his sin by considering his punishment.

2. Consider what that sin is for which thy conscience doth most of all accuse thee. Conscience is God's vicegerent, His bosom-preacher. And when we slight the voice of conscience, God seconds it with the voice of His rod,

which speaks the very same language that conscience doth.

3. Consider what is the sin of thy complexion and constitution, what is thy beloved sin; what is that sin to which thou art most of all inclined; and if that sin prevail over thee, and thou canst not say with David, (Ps. xviii. 23,) "I have kept myself from mine iniquity," it is very probable that for the subduing of that sin thou art corrected of God.

4. If ever thou hast been at the gates of death, despairing of life, consider what that sin was which did then most of all trouble and perplex thy conscience; or if ever thou hast been in a dream, supposing thyself to be dying, and breathing out thy last, what was that sin which did then most of all affright thee: it is very likely that God, by afflicting thee, intends to get that sin more conquered and mortified.

5. Consider what those sins are for

D

which thy godly minister, under whose care thou livest, doth reprove thee, and of which thy true and real friends do accuse thee; for, if thou hast slighted the voice of thy faithful minister and friends, surely God, out of His love to thee, followeth their advice with the voice of His rod, that thereby He may open thine ear to discipline, and command thee to depart from those iniquities.

But if thou canst not find out that particular sin, for which God afflicts thee, labour to repent of every sin, and then thou wilt be sure to repent of that sin. If thou canst not find out the bee that stings thee, pull down the whole hive; or the thorn that pricks thee, pull down the whole hedge. Do that out of wisdom, which Herod did out of malice, who because he could not find out the babe Jesus, killed all the children in Bethlehem, from two years old and under, that so he might be sure to kill Jesus. Let us seek the utter ruin

and death of all our sins, and then we shall be sure to destroy that sin for which God afflicts us; and when the cause is removed, the disease will forthwith be cured, and the Almighty pacified and reconciled unto us.

4. Let us labour that the good we reap by our afflictions may abide upon us after our recovery from them. There are very many who, while they are under the rod, seem to be very penitent, and do purpose and promise to amend their lives, but as soon as the rod is removed they return like the dog to the vomit, &c. Such was Pharaoh; whilst he was plagued he confessed his sin, and prayed for pardon, but as soon as ever the judgment was gone he hardened his heart. Such were the Israelites, (Ps. lxxviii. 34-37,) "They were not steadfast, they turned back." Just like a truant schoolboy, who while his master is whipping him, will promise anything, but when it is done forgets presently to do what he promised; or

The good we get by our afflictions must remain with us after our recovery.

like unto water, which while it is upon the fire is very hot, but as soon as ever it is taken off the fire presently groweth cold. I knew a man who in the time of his sickness was so terrified in his conscience for his sins that he made the very bed to shake upon which he lay, and cried out all night long, "I am damned, I am damned," and made many and great protestations of amendment of life, if God would be pleased to recover him. In a little while he did recover; and being recovered, was as bad and as wicked as ever before.

And therefore let us labour that the good we get by our afflictions may not vanish away with them, but may abide on us after we are recovered, that we may be able to say with David, "It is good for me that I was afflicted;" not only that I am, but that I was; David praiseth God in health for the good he had got in sickness, and which still abode with him. Let us say with the same prophet, (Ps. lxvi. 13, 14,) "I

will go into thy house with burnt-offerings; I will pay thee my vows which my lips have uttered, and my mouth have spoken, when I was in trouble." Let us pray unto God that His affliction may not only skin over our spiritual diseases, and expose our sins, but mortify them, and so change our natures that we may never return to folly.

I will conclude this point with a famous saying of Plinius Secundus, worthy to be written in letters of gold. A friend writes to him, and entreats him to give him advice how to frame his life, so as he might live as becomes a good man. He returns him this answer: I will not prescribe many rules; there is this one only which I commend to thee above all other—Let us labour to continue and persevere to be such, when we are well, as we purpose and promise to ourselves to be when we are sick. There is hardly any man so wicked but he will in sickness make many and great

promises of a new life and of universal reformation if God would restore him. Now then, if we not only be such, but continue to be such when restored, as we promise to be when sick, then we shall be excellent scholars in the school of affliction, and God will either, as I have already said, deliver us out of affliction, or send us to heaven by affliction. So much for the first truth supposed.